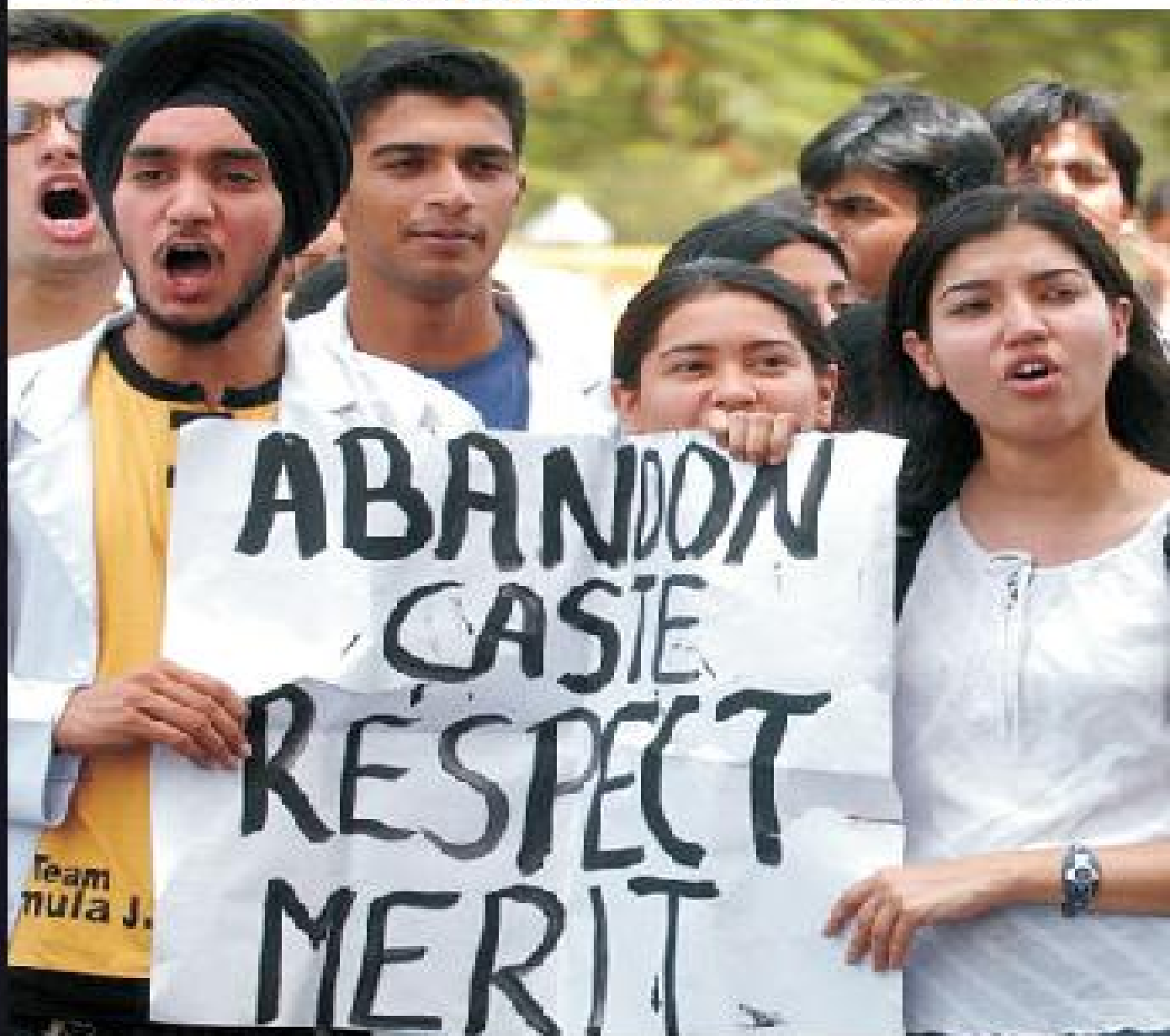




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Edited by
SATISH DESHPANDE

The Problem of Caste



Essays from Economic and Political Weekly

The Problem of Caste

Readings on the Economy, Polity and Society

This series is being published as part of a University Grants Commission project to promote teaching and research in the social sciences in India. The project (2010–12) has been jointly executed by the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, and the Economic and Political Weekly. The series is meant to introduce university students and research scholars to important research that has been published in EPW in specific areas. The journal has, over the decades, published a large number of research papers in all the social sciences. The readers draw on this archive of EPW 's published articles. The titles—in economics, politics, sociology and the environment—reflect EPW 's strengths as well as the interests of the academic community. Each set of readings is compiled by a senior academic who has also written an introductory essay for the volume. TISS and EPW are grateful to the authors of the articles included here for permission to reprint them.

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The Problem of Caste

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Delhi

1 April 2014

Satish Deshpande

INTRODUCTION

Caste Concerns in the Contemporary Social Sciences: Six Decades of Writings in the Economic and Political Weekly, 1958-2013

SATISH DESHPANDE

As one of a series of volumes sponsored by the University Grants Commission (UGC), this book aims to provide researchers, teachers and especially students easier access to the immense intellectual resource that is the *Economic and Political Weekly (EPW)*. Anyone familiar with the social science scene in India knows that the *EPW* occupies a unique place not only in local-regional intellectual life but also globally. This is not just because its contents straddle the divide between scholarly writing and social-political commentary, but also because it stretches across disciplines and has the unheard of periodicity (for academic journals) of one week. As an independent journal that hosts both academics and activists, that is scholarly yet not discipline-identified, the *EPW* is undoubtedly the single most important general barometer of intellectual concerns in the Indian context. This is true even though the *EPW* is not necessarily the best indicator of trends in the academic mainstream, given its changing relationship with different disciplines. Moreover, independence from institutional orthodoxy is an asset when it comes to caste, both because social theory has lagged behind empirical developments, and because contemporary caste transcends disciplinary boundaries.

Though it is obviously concerned with the social science disciplines, this book does not seek to represent any

particular disciplinary perspective on caste. Instead it tries to exploit the unique resource that the *EPW* represents in order to track how intellectuals across academic disciplines have responded to the caste question in independent India. Before highlighting some of the significant aspects of this collective response, it is necessary to give the reader some sense of how the articles collected in this volume relate to the larger body of writing from which they are drawn.

PART I

QUESTIONS OF REPRESENTATION

Table I.1 presents the decade-wise distribution of the number of articles on caste published in the *Economic Weekly* (*EW*) and the *EPW* from the 1950s to 2012. The number of articles is perhaps the most robust but also a relatively crude indicator of ‘levels of interest’ on the subject. In compiling these data, the initial method was a database search of article titles for the word caste or closely related terms (Dalit, Scheduled Caste [SC], Other Backward Classes [OBCs], untouchability, etc.). Because of the high risk of missing relevant articles by this method, the blurbs of articles were browsed in an issue-by-issue manual search. So while the numbers themselves are robust, some contextual qualifications need to be kept in mind: (a) There is no method for ‘weighting’ an article according to some measure of its relative importance. The only rough index of this is the division between special articles and other articles, *EPW* terminology for scholarly-academic articles and topical commentaries respectively. While scholarly articles are usually research-based and longer, many ‘other’ articles (especially in the period since the 1990s) have been equally or more influential; (b) The number of articles published and especially the variation in these numbers across time may be affected by exogenous

factors relating to logistics or editorial policy. For example, the average size of an issue of the journal (in terms of number of pages) has increased from the early decades to the more recent period. Moreover, the 'Special Articles' feature has also increased significantly in relative weight since the early decades. From the 1980s onwards, the average issue of the *EPW* carries at least three or often four special articles, not counting special issues where curated collections might carry many more. Therefore, the special articles of the early decade carry more weight individually because of their smaller number. Finally, there is no way of checking if the increase in published articles since 1990 is solely due to an increase in submissions by authors writing on caste, or whether shifts in editorial policy also played some role by raising the 'acceptance rate' for submissions on caste in the post-Mandal era. Fortunately, we need not worry too much about these kinds of qualifications because the broad trend in numbers is too strong to be just a statistical artefact.

The most striking feature of Table I.1 is the sustained jump in publications on caste after the 1990s as reflected in the 'Total *EPW* Articles' columns. This provides strong support for the quickening of intellectual interest in caste after the Mandal events of 1990, a feature that is discussed in the next section. The figure for total articles during the 1990s (123) is nearly three times the figure for the 1980s (44). Moreover, the Mandal divide of 1990 is relevant to the entire six decades—whereas the total number of articles in the 40 years from 1950 to 1990 is 189, as many as 278 were published in just 23 years between 1990 and 2012. Thus, the latter period accounts for nearly 60 per cent of the grand total for the whole period (1950–2012) even though it covers only about one-third of this duration. A second feature is the pattern in the pre-1990s era. Here a peaking is visible in the 1960s decade with a relative

decline in the 1970s and 1980s before the Mandal-triggered explosion of the 1990s.

TABLE I.1: Decadal Distribution of Articles on Caste in the *Economic Weekly* and the *Economic and Political Weekly*, 1950–2012

Decades	Special Articles ^a		Other Articles ^b		Total <i>EPW</i> Articles		In this Volume	
	Number	Per cent	Number	Per cent	Number	Per cent	Number	Per cent
1950–59	27	12.1	1	0.4	28	6.0	1	2.5
1960–69	55	24.8	10	4.1	65	13.9	2	5.0
1970–79	22	9.8	30	12.3	52	11.1	4	10.0
1980–89	25	11.2	19	7.8	44	9.4	2	5.0
1990–99	129	57.6	60	24.7	189	40.5	9	22.5
2000–09	37	16.5	86	35.4	123	26.3	9	22.5
2010–12 ^c	47	21.0	83	34.2	130	27.8	15	37.5
1950–2012	95	42.4	183	75.3	278	59.5	31	77.5
Total	224	100.0	243	100.0	467	100.0	40	100.0

Notes: (a) Special Articles are the longer, more technical and scholarly articles at the end of each issue of the journal; this column includes articles from 1949–2012. (b) Other Articles refers to all formats other than Special Articles, Editorials and Book Reviews, which are usually shorter and meant for the general reader; these include features such as 'Perspectives', 'Commentary', 'Insight', etc., and are placed at the beginning of each issue, after the editorials; this column includes articles from 1956–2012. (c) Note that the 'decade' of 2010s includes only three years. Also, while three articles from 2013 have been included in this volume, the tabulation of the *EPW* articles is only up to 2012.

Source: Computed from a compilation of all articles relating to caste made by the *EPW* staff.

It is also noteworthy that much of the increase after 1990 takes the form of 'Other Articles' rather than 'Special Articles'. It could be argued that this pattern across the categories of 'Special' and 'Other' also underlines the contemporary importance of Mandal. This is where the unique value of the *EPW* as an independent indicator of intellectual interests free from disciplinary orthodoxies is most clearly visible. If one were to look at the mainstream journals that represent sociology and social anthropology, for example, one would get a very different impression of the social and intellectual significance of events like Mandal. This is not to ignore the justifications that different kinds of journals (with different audiences and mandates)

may have for addressing some issues and not others, but simply to underline the fact that the *EPW* is a significant indicator in its own right.

The last two columns on the right of Table I.1 show the composition of this volume relative to the total material available. The selection clearly has a presentist bias—the more recent decades occupy a proportionately much larger share of the total space available. The Mandal divide is also magnified—almost 78 per cent of the articles here are post-1990, whereas the figure for *EPW* is about 60 per cent. The leaning towards later publications is a common feature for collections of this sort, given that their mandate is to locate material that will be most useful for teaching. It is rare for older publications to retain their relevance, unless they are of interest precisely as witnesses of their times. For most social science subjects, ongoing developments outflank even the best research, rendering it obsolete. This is all the more true for the present volume since the recent history of the caste question has been particularly eventful.

But while such data may provide a broad quantitative justification for the assertion that social scientific interest in caste seems to have increased substantially since the 1990s, they do not tell us about the nature of this engagement. How, from what standpoints, have social scientists approached the caste question? Have the modalities of engagement changed?

PART II

SOCIAL SCIENTIFIC RESPONSES TO CASTE

The Mandal Moment

A significant, and now widely recognised, aspect of the contemporary response to caste is that it has been shaped in important ways by the ‘Mandal’ phenomenon. Of course,

caste was hardly an unknown issue before 1990, but the agitation against the union government's belated decision to implement the recommendations of the Mandal Commission seems to have marked a decisive turning point.¹ Since the political and social salience of this critical event were immediately visible, it is not surprising that these dimensions received ample academic attention. What has become visible only retrospectively, however, is the theoretical-conceptual importance of Mandal for the study of caste in contemporary India.

Caste is one of the oldest themes in the literature on traditional India, and it also claims significant space in work on the modern period. As such, it has been extensively and intensively studied, both as an empirical phenomenon and as a civilisational idea. Its latter avatar—caste as the foundational principle of Hindu-Indic social structure—has proved particularly contentious. Caste in this sense has received lavish attention from classical Indology and anthropology as well as the colonial state, which has in turn provoked vehement protests from nationalist and anti-imperialist standpoints. These standpoints have also had their academic counterparts in the form of objections to what has been seen as the persistent caste-obsession of scholarship on India. Made from different vantage points, these criticisms have argued that, whatever its status in the tradition-bound past, the alleged conceptual importance of caste in the modern period is more a colonialist fabrication than indigenous reality.² Thus, while the category may continue to be helpful in defining specific topics of social science research—like kinship practices, voting in elections, social networks and so on—it has no role as an overarching concept for understanding contemporary India. The ultimate implication is that caste as defined by social anthropology (a closed social institution regulated by rules of heredity,

endogamy and commensality) is dead or dying, but has been kept alive on life-support systems provided by the colonial state and post-colonial political interest groups. It is this hegemonic perception that Mandal changed irrevocably. Even if it was more catalyst than cause, Mandal triggered a new awakening—it established caste as an indispensable category for thinking about contemporary India.

In a seminal essay that did not receive the kind of attention that it richly deserved, Vivek Dhareshwar has offered an insightful description of this change of perspective and its implications (Dhareshwar 1993). He argues that, before Mandal, ‘caste had no place in the narrative milieu of the secular self’ of modern Indian intellectuals who, for historical reasons, had to (and chose to) disown their inherited upper-caste identity. This meant that caste became unavailable ‘as a category for critical reflection’, since it was banished to an elsewhere (like rural society or the traditional past) far from the here-and-now of the Indian intellectual (ibid.: 115). In brief, caste was intellectually repressed in post-Independence India—it became an ‘experience distant’ rather than an ‘experience near’ concept.³

Dhareshwar’s account is prescient in recognising that Mandal became a watershed not because of the immediate issues like reservations, but because it precipitated the ‘return of the repressed’. Its true significance is in the realisation that, while the distancing of caste has been a defining feature of upper-caste experience in independent India, this experience has been invisible to the privileged upper-caste intellectuals *as caste-experience*, being seen instead as evidence of their having transcended caste. What is new about the ‘awakening’ triggered by Mandal is the re-implication of the upper-caste self into the caste question, and the consequent recognition of this question

as a universal and core (rather than sectarian and peripheral) issue. As so many writers in this collection argue in different ways, the rejuvenation of caste studies follows from the belated discovery that the problems associated with caste—reservations or Untouchability, for example—belong not just to ‘them’ but also to ‘us’.

While the importance of Mandal as a critical watershed must be acknowledged, it is also important not to exaggerate it. After all, a large part of the retrospectively identified ‘Mandal effect’ actually involves the re-positioning and intensification of already established agendas and methods rather than any fresh innovations. If Mandal inaugurated a new kind of interest in caste, where and how can this newness be made visible? And if Mandal was not a beginning but a turning point, what are its continuities with the past?

New Directions and Old Themes

This section outlines some of the overarching themes and motifs of this volume to alert the reader about its similarities and differences with other collections on caste. Since the task of evaluation is best left to readers and reviewers, what is presented here is only a description of tendencies and attributes. Some of these were produced by editorial choice, others were fortuitous after effects. But all the features described below have one thing in common—they represent tendencies that are much more than mere individual preferences. A good place to begin this description might be the question: How does this volume relate to the prominent ways in which caste has been approached in the past?

When they begin to be scientifically studied, most subjects are approached via numerous access points, issues, or sites of research. Scholarly attention is never distributed evenly across these points of access—some routes attract heavy traffic while others are less travelled by. Sometimes the

most popular points of access become so important that they themselves come to stand for the thing to which they provide access. In the case of caste, this kind of a substitution of the part for the whole has been most visible with themes like the village, untouchability and reservations. Each of these has provided access to the larger phenomenon of 'caste'—the village as an empirical site; untouchability as an idea and practice; and reservations as state policy and public issue. We know that none of them 'equals' caste in the sense of being everything that we mean by the word. But we also know that in different contexts and in different ways each of these has seemed to stand for caste, to define the very idea. Working in the manner of a spotlight, these have highlighted certain aspects of caste by making other aspects dim or invisible. This has been both productive and limiting, effects which are better explained in concrete terms.

As is well known, the genre of 'village studies' was one of the most important vehicles for studying caste in the early decades after Independence.⁴ Pioneered by scholars like M. N. Srinivas, McKim Marriott, S. C. Dube and D. N. Mazumdar, village studies were based on detailed ethnographic accounts of life in a specific village community produced by participant-observers who lived in that community for extended periods. Prominent sociologists like Srinivas defended the village as a social institution fostering a sense of belonging and loyalty, something much more than just an 'architectural' entity.⁵ Village studies have contributed much of the existing social scientific knowledge about the practice of caste as a living institution. So much so that, in conjunction with the relative rarity of urban caste studies, they have fostered a view of caste as a primarily rural phenomenon. The apparent affinity of the rural for 'tradition' has magnified this effect, so that village studies have been among the

most potent forces enabling the distancing of caste from urban upper-caste milieus that Mandal made visible. In more recent times, however, change has overtaken the idea of the village as a bounded and coherent social unit, prompting sociologists to speculate on its imminent demise as a category around which social research may be organised.⁶

One of the notable features of this volume is that the village as a research site appears in only two chapters—those by Anand Chakravarti (chapter 12), and by S. Anandhi, J. Jeyaranjan and Rajan Krishnan (chapter 33), though village studies also find mention in the chapters by M. N. Srinivas (chapter 2) and André Béteille (chapter 4). Chakravarti's study may be located in the village studies tradition, although it may equally be thought of as a study in agrarian political economy. His sustained focus on agrarian relations and the conditions of employment is also in keeping with one strand of village studies. But the village of Anandhi, Jeyaranjan and Krishnan's study is vastly different from those studied in the 1950s and 1960s—it is more an outpost of the city. Globalised industrialisation and access to (sporadic) non-agricultural employment have transformed caste relations in this village, but these transformations are intimately related to—and seem to work through—gender relations. It is almost as if the intensification of patriarchy is a necessary byproduct of lower-caste assertion.

Since the very beginning of social scientific interest in caste, the practice of untouchability and the ideology that it presupposes have attracted the intense and sustained attention of scholars. In fact, more than any other aspect of caste it is untouchability that has been accorded theoretical importance as being the key category with which to 'think' caste. It is interesting to note that this extends to the political realm as well—the abolition of untouchability has

been equated with the abolition of caste itself. When extended to Dalits, the castes defined by untouchability, the scope and influence of the category are vastly expanded. Though it is hard to prove this conclusively, the claim that more research has been done on Dalits than on any other caste group is unlikely to be challenged.

On the whole, the metonymic (part standing for whole) status of untouchability vis-à-vis caste has been very productive, having generated insightful analyses of caste and caste relations. This is probably due to the fact that has been noted by so many scholars, namely that untouchability represents the inescapable part of caste, the point at which it is impossible to explain in terms of other social or economic causes. One possibility that always needs to be considered though is whether a focus on untouchability truncates the concept and institution of caste such that its other aspects lose focus. In a reversal of the common saying about the best and the good, untouchability may be an instance where the focus on the worst could potentially make us neglect the bad.

It is not surprising that as many as 12 essays—nearly one third—in this volume deal directly with untouchability or with Dalits. It is noteworthy that of these, four chapters are on untouchability while the remaining eight are on Dalits; clearly the latter term is used much more extensively. Marc Galanter (chapter 8) provides a fascinating account of the obstacles encountered in fashioning a workable legal definition of untouchability, demonstrating that an idea that is all about drawing sharp boundaries can itself be very fuzzy because of its seamless integration into broader forms of socio-cultural practice or religious observance. Sundar Sarukkai (Ch. 9) and Gopal Guru (Ch. 40) are in conversation with each other on the subject of untouchability, their central shared insight being the deep co-implication of the Brahmin in both the idea and practice of untouchability. Surinder Jodhka and Ghanshyam Shah's

report (Ch. 23) on a survey of untouchability in South Asia shows the practice to be widespread in the subcontinent, despite varying degrees of state recognition and legal remedies.

The eight essays on Dalits cover a very wide range, demonstrating the breadth of research on this subject that can now claim the status of a sub-discipline.⁷ Looked at from another angle, these essays also give us a sense of the evolution of perspectives over the past few decades. The eight essays may be usefully divided into four pairs. Rajni Kothari (Ch. 5) and Aditya Nigam (Ch. 37) broadly represent the generational shift in political theory and how it views Dalits.⁸ It is interesting that the frameworks employed seem to overlap to a significant extent, notably in framing Dalit politics in relation to the Left and Hindu communalism, but the treatment is very different, particularly in terms of the space given to Dalit thinkers. The next pair is Baldev Raj Nayar's 1962 analysis (Ch. 16) of voting behaviour in a parliamentary constituency reserved for the SCs, and Sudha Pai's comparative analysis (Ch. 21) of strategies for Dalit mobilisation by the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) in Uttar Pradesh (UP) and the Congress Party in Madhya Pradesh. The striking feature here is the lack of an inter-generational divide; instead, these two studies showcase the yield of research on the electoral process, from the sharp focus on a specific election in a specific constituency to a more sweeping state-level analysis. It is interesting to note in passing that Nayar's study of the 1962 election shows us that the basic insight of election studies with respect to caste—that caste mobilisation is an intricate and uncertain process that needs hard work, and there is no such thing as a ready made 'vote bank'—was available to us half-a-century ago.

The third pair, Anand Teltumbde (Ch. 22) and the late K. Balagopal (Ch. 25), present us with opposing aspects of the

Dalit condition. Teltumbde's account of the orchestrated murder of an entire family of upwardly mobile Dalits in Khairlanji is a grim reminder of the persistence of the 'atrocities' as an integral aspect of caste relations in globalising India, as well as the fact that it is a phenomenon yet to be theorised adequately. Balagopal points to the bitter ironies involved in the intra-Dalit struggle for better distribution of the benefits of reservations among Dalit castes in Andhra Pradesh, with the relatively privileged Malas invoking exactly the same arguments against the sub-division of the reservation quota that the upper castes had deployed against reservation itself. Finally, the essays by Sharmila Rege (Ch. 32) and Rekha Raj (Ch. 34) point to the crucial intersectional position occupied by Dalit women within the women's question in contemporary India. While Rege's well-known essay attempts to forge a standpoint theory that will help build alliances and soften the hard exclusionary edges of identity politics without encroaching on the leadership roles of Dalit women, Raj points to the kind of detailed empirical work needed to document the complex histories of Dalit women's empowerment.

The third longstanding theme in caste studies has been that of reservations, one of the most emotive and eventful sites in recent history. But while it is also an important and necessary subject of research like untouchability, unlike the latter its net contribution to the understanding of caste has probably been negative. This is because of the fact that where the equation of caste with untouchability has undoubtedly been beneficial despite concerns, and its equation with the village or the rural has been ambiguous, the equation of caste with reservations has been disabling. While all part-whole substitutions run the risk of abridging the whole, the net value of this abridgement depends on what is offered in return. In the case of reservations, the debate usually remains confined to narrow disputes on

policy and procedure that obscure the larger issues that necessitate the policy in the first place. Moreover, the reservations issue is generally framed as being of and for the lower castes, an issue in which the upper castes have no role other than that of aggrieved victims or benevolent bystanders.

The six essays that deal with reservations in this volume resist the dominant modes of framing reservations described above and offer various alternative standpoints. The reflective piece by Susie Tharu, M. Madhava Prasad, Rekha Pappu and K. Satyanarayana (Ch. 26) directly addresses the manner in which the framing of reservations impoverishes our understanding of caste by obscuring its political dimension. The upper-caste understanding of reservations represses the fact that they were an integral part of the social contract on the basis of which the nation was founded, and as such, are more a form of power sharing and less the welfare measure that they are taken to be. Approaching reservations from the opposite end of personal experience, Kancha Ilaiah (Ch. 35) offers a simple and moving account of what this impersonal state policy means in concrete terms to the people whose lives it transforms. Galanter (Ch. 24) offers yet another example of careful scholarship in bringing precision and clarity to the exceedingly complex issue of fashioning a legal definition of the 'Other Backward Classes' that would enable the state to carry out its constitutionally mandated responsibilities. Both I. P. Desai's analysis of the 1980s anti-reservation agitation in Gujarat (Ch. 19) and K. Balagopal's anguished comment on the anti-Mandal agitations of 1990 (Ch. 20) are reminders of the fact that political mobilisation against reservations has been equally if not more vociferous than agitations for it. Desai's article is especially valuable because it documents the deployment of the same arguments and agitational modes that were witnessed in the Mandal agitation of the next decade, including the

ideology of 'merit'. Satish Deshpande's essay (Ch. 39) also raises the issue of the unseen and unspoken underbelly of reservations, namely the moral and material privileges of the unmarked upper-caste citizen.

If these are the ways in which this volume engages with some of the older themes in caste studies, what are the new directions that it explores? At the most general level, what is new here is more an overall orientation or stance rather than new themes as such. The simplest way of describing this stance is to say that it resists the distancing of caste that the Mandal moment made visible. It is not that every essay here adopts this stance—this would not be possible for the earlier ones anyway—but that this volume demonstrates a collective tilt in this direction. Roughly speaking, one can see this movement across the volume (i.e., from the initial sections to the later ones) as well as within sections (especially in those that contain essays spanning the pre- and post-Mandal periods.) Regardless of the specific issue or theme they may be pursuing, most of the essays here (including almost all from the 1990s or later) frame caste as an inclusive and universal (and not an exclusive or sectarian) phenomenon. This is in contrast to the ways in which caste used to be framed before, ways that stressed its alterity or otherness relative to the intellectual him/herself. Caste and caste-related issues used to be endowed with a certain 'they-ness'; most of the contributions to this volume accord a new kind of 'we-ness' to it. This 'we-ness' does not signify any facile unity or solidarity—it is a self-implication, or more accurately, a refusal of the self-exemption that was implicit in prior scholarly practice. One concrete sign of this is that most contributions address or engage both ends of the caste spectrum, the so-called 'upper' as much as the 'lower' castes, as has already been pointed out above with the essays on the themes of untouchability and reservations.

There are also some themes that emerge from the new orientation, but they are not so much new as the products of re-positioning and re-discovery. They are aspects of caste that were known in a factual sense but were nevertheless not actively present in the collective consciousness. Two themes present in this volume are—caste discrimination and caste-based access to or exclusion from material resources and opportunities; and a caste-inflected re-telling of the biography of the Indian nation.

It might seem odd to claim that there is a certain newness (or recent-ness) to the scholarly attention that caste discrimination is receiving today. After all, untouchability is a form of discrimination, and has always been associated with caste and even equated with it. But this itself has been the problem. Untouchability has seemed quintessentially a socio-cultural or semi-religious practice, and its hard economic edge has tended to be hidden from view. This is also in keeping with the dominant ideology of Nehruvian India, where the new constitution, reservations and the legacy of the Gandhian campaign against untouchability and caste prejudice had made it seem that active discrimination was a thing of the past. Moreover, discrimination was treated more as a matter of social or political action rather than a material-economic practice worthy of being researched. It should count as a significant development, therefore, that economists and sociologists are now beginning to study the concrete mechanics of discriminatory practices that affect life chances through access to employment or differential returns on resources. The contributions of Thorat and Newman (Ch. 7), Upadhya (Ch. 13), Deshpande and Newman (Ch. 14) and Jodhka and Shah (Ch. 23) are examples of this welcome trend. From the opposite angle, Chakravarti (Ch. 12) and Gopal (Ch. 15) document the limitations on life chances imposed by lower-caste identity.

Perhaps the largest theme proposed by contemporary work on caste—that is, the one with the broadest panoramic sweep in historical and conceptual terms—is the re-imagining of the idea of the Indian nation. The distinctiveness of this theme becomes visible in two ways, first, in the re-telling of the history of nation-formation by including its hitherto neglected parts; and second in the significant shift in the storyline. The first effect is much older, though its concerted impact has begun to be felt relatively recently. This is exemplified by the historical essays in this collection that seek to recover neglected portions of what ought to be national history, such as the Satyashodhak-inspired rebellion in late nineteenth-century Maharashtra that Gail Omvedt documents (Ch. 17), or the essays on Periyar and the self-respect movement in south India chronicled by Mohan Ram (Ch. 18) and V. Geetha (Ch. 31). In a different way, Kumkum Roy's commemoration of D. D. Kosambi (Ch. 6) and Uma Chakravarti's analysis of the origins of brahminical patriarchy (Ch. 29) show how the past can be re-interpreted, and that tradition need not be univocal. If modern statistical devices like the census are also techniques for imagining the nation, then the essays by Padmanabha Samarendra (Ch. 27) and Satish Deshpande and Mary E. John (Ch. 28) present different perspectives on the place that caste might have had in the past, and could have in future.

The second effect, that of a change in the storyline of caste and the nation, makes itself felt in terms of the loss of a 'transition narrative'. Transition has been a powerful motif in the history of the Indian nation where it has appeared in many forms—as the transition from tradition to modernity, from a pre-capitalist to a fully capitalist society, or from an underdeveloped to a developed economy.⁹ With respect to caste, the transition narrative of the Gandhi-Nehru era was that of the abolition—or as Ambedkar put it,

the annihilation—of caste. This narrative of the journey towards a caste-free future formed the larger horizon for scholarship on caste and coloured its analysis of caste in the present. The powerful influence of this emancipatory telos can be felt in the essays of the older generation of contributors to this volume, most noticeably in the essays of M. N. Srinivas (Ch. 2) and André Béteille (Ch. 4), and to a lesser extent in those of Irawati Karve (Ch. 1) and Rajni Kothari (Ch. 5). The influence of the transition narrative is visible in the pre-occupation with the longevity of caste—its strange, unexpected and certainly unwanted tenacity. The absence of this effect is visible in the contributions of later generations of scholars, such as the essays of Rege (Ch. 32), Deshpande (Ch. 39) and especially Nigam (Ch. 37) and Pandian (Ch. 38). The longevity of caste is no longer a concern, not even in the background. That it is here to stay till the foreseeable future seems to be taken for granted, even though the commitment to the ‘abolition’ of caste has by no means been abjured. It is just that the sense of historically imminent transition is not felt.¹⁰ Neither the earlier presence of a telos nor its later absence is ‘internal’ to the specific essays cited—i.e., it is not a virtue or vice but rather a contextual frame that inevitably colours everything within it.

This is not a simple change, nor are its implications straightforward. The loss of a telos is debilitating and burdensome. It makes optimism that much more difficult, even as it drastically raises the intellectual stakes in thinking about emancipatory futures. But it also frees us from the weight of the past, of various inherited forms of blindness and bad faith. In any case, the old utopias are no longer available, and moving beyond them is neither an achievement nor a choice, it is a manifestation of historical change, or of the shifting of larger interpretive horizons.

This section has been concerned with the themes and motifs that are discernible in this collection of articles once they had been brought together. In a certain sense these are the attributes that became retrospectively visible, even though the mode of selection may (wittingly or unwittingly) have favoured these very attributes. It remains now to talk about the structuring of this collection, its various sections, and the place that individual pieces have within them.

PART III

THE STRUCTURE OF THIS BOOK

Given the vast amount of material available (a total of 467 articles according to Table I.1) and the range of perspectives and fields to be covered, the first editorial decision was to ensure the inclusion of as many articles as possible. This meant that a uniform (but approximate) word limit would have to be applied and the longer pieces carefully abridged, with a few very long articles being excerpted. The next general requirement, common to all the books in this series, was that the collection be useful for teaching. A further twist gets added to this requirement because of the subject. Caste is surely among the top two or three themes in terms of the number of publications, particularly edited collections. To add meaningfully to this already crowded field, this volume must try to be distinctive in some way. This has been attempted by foregrounding recent developments which signal changes in the orientation towards caste. The general principle for selection, therefore, was to produce a set of articles that would highlight contemporary concerns while also giving space to long established perspectives in order to offer the reader a sense of the shifts that have occurred. It is hoped that this collection of 40 essays by scholars from roughly three generations will allow readers to make their own

evaluations of the implications of these changes. There will, of course, be the inevitable differences of opinion about any particular selection, but this at any rate was the broad intention.

Coming from this kind of a perspective, there were two kinds of fields or areas within caste studies that needed to be represented. First, traditional areas of concern over the past five or six decades and second, more recent areas that have had a significant impact on caste studies. Of the six sections in this book the two that fall in the first category are obviously sections two and three on 'Caste and Class', and 'Caste and Politics' respectively. Emergent areas are represented in section five on 'Caste and Gender', and in section six blandly titled 'Contemporary Explorations', because the articles in this section have only their currentness in common rather than any particular theme like class, politics or gender. Section four on 'Caste, State and Law' can claim to belong to both categories because it contains work on longstanding issues as well as fresh approaches. Section one on 'Disciplinary Perspectives' aims to exploit and highlight the transdisciplinary sweep of the *EPW*, and is made necessary by the fact that this volume does not represent any particular disciplinary point of view although it is concerned with the social sciences as a whole.

Section One: Disciplinary Perspectives

This section tries to showcase some examples of how caste has been approached through six disciplines—sociology and social anthropology; politics; economics; history; law; and philosophy. Given the status of the *EPW* as a non-disciplinary journal, the examples presented here are, generally speaking, illustrative rather than authoritative. This is because the material available for this section is clearly dependent on the varied relationships that the *EPW* has had with different disciplines, and their ups and downs.

This has to be balanced against the fact that not all social science disciplines have been interested in caste to the same extent or in the same way. In fact, it is probably fair to say that apart from sociology/social anthropology and political science, the other disciplines have begun to take a steady interest in caste only recently. An interesting exception is the field of law, which was forced early on to deal on a practical level with the fallout of the political struggles around caste as embodied in the Constitution.

Since they have been most closely concerned with caste, the twin disciplines of sociology and social anthropology have been given the most space, with as many as four separate contributions. The attempt here is to provide a sense of the most influential approaches and their spread, a sort of overview of the dominant sociological standpoints. Irawati Karve's essay (Ch. 1) is the last instalment of a three-part article with the overall title 'What is Caste?' that was published in 1958. The influence of Indology and anthropology are visible here, helping to mark Karve's position as a key figure in the history of Indian sociology straddling both these fields. Of the several pieces by M. N. Srinivas in the *EPW*, the one included here offers both a retrospective view of his own earlier work as well as a prospective speculation on the future of caste, written in 1979. This essay is notable both as an illustration of the field-based approach advocated by Srinivas, as well as an example of the scholarly pre-occupation with the persistence of caste. Dipankar Gupta's contribution is important as an example of what a specifically theoretical provocation has been able to achieve in sociological studies of caste. Critically engaging with the influential theoretical model of Louis Dumont, Gupta argues that rather than a unified system with a single overarching notion of hierarchy, caste is organised in the form of discrete castes believing in multiple versions of hierarchy, which is merely an attribute of caste rather than its essence. The last of the

disciplinary representatives of Indian sociology is André Béteille, whose long and distinguished career spans the post-Independence life of the subject of caste. Béteille participated in the inaugural wave of village studies in which caste had a prominent place, and has been one of Louis Dumont's more combative interlocutors. Béteille's essay in this volume is from 2012 and thus represents a long-term account of the problem of caste and concern over its 'peculiar tenacity' which, according to him, is due mainly to electoral politics and the media.

Political science has been the other social science discipline with a long engagement with the caste question. It is represented here by one of the pioneers of research on the intersection of caste and politics in India, Rajni Kothari (Ch. 5). His 1994 reflections on the renewed salience of Dalit politics after Mandal provide an interesting point of comparison with the sociological perspectives outlined in the earlier chapters. It is significant that substantial contributions on the economic aspects of caste were not easy to find. This is in keeping with the early orientation of Indian economics and the general bias against caste among not only economists but intellectuals in general. The contribution by S. K. Thorat and Katherine Newman is also the introduction to an edited volume in which economists and sociologists come together to study caste discrimination. Marc Galanter's 1969 essay offers a glimpse of the complex definitional issues that marked the encounter between the legal system of the newly independent republic and the phenomenon of untouchability. The case of history is somewhat different because of the difficulty in finding contributions that can illuminate a disciplinary stance. Kumkum Roy's critical appreciation of D. D. Kosambi's engagement with caste shows why his work is important for all social scientists because of his sustained pursuit of the class-caste conundrum and particularly his efforts at producing

‘subversive histories of caste’ by interrogating canonical texts. The newest essay in this section, Sunder Sarukkai’s attempt to produce a phenomenological description of the role of touch in defining untouchability, provides evidence of how caste attracts all disciplines today, in this case philosophy. The provocative aspect of this essay is the successful co-implication of the brahmin self in the construction of untouchability as a social modality. The concluding essay by Gopal Guru (Ch. 10) acts as a heterodox challenge to disciplines and academic practice in general. If the other essays in this section may be seen as answers to the question ‘what can social science tell us about caste?’, then Guru’s essay asks the reverse question, namely, ‘what can caste tell us about social science practice?’ His reflexive critique implicates both upper caste and Dalit intellectuals in different ways.

Section Two: Caste and Class

The relationship of caste to class is one of the oldest questions in Indian social science, and the defining question of Nehruvian India in particular. It is no coincidence, therefore, that all the senior Indian scholars featured in the previous section—Karve, Srinivas, Bêteille, Kothari, and especially the professed Marxist Kosambi—are concerned with this question. However, its very pre-eminence, and the manner in which it was usually posed, have made it an oddly disabling question. It is hardly surprising that in the era of decolonisation, enormous hope was invested in economic development as the solution to all manner of social and historical problems. Despite their formidable challenges, poverty and underdevelopment seemed explainable and, therefore, transformable in ways that caste or religious divisions were not. That is why class came to be considered the legitimate axis of stratification in the social sciences, and questions about the economic dimensions of caste were reduced to the teleological

expectation that it would be transformed into class.¹¹ But like all transition narratives, this framework tended to narrow the focus of attention to only those features of caste that were considered relevant to it, thus crowding out alternative descriptions of what was actually happening in the present. The most debilitating aspect of this mode of posing the question has been the implicit expectation that caste would somehow become inert or lose its effectivity when alloyed with class. The possibilities of a synergistic union—by which each might enhance the force of the other without dissolving its distinctive character—could not be adequately explored.

The essays in this section are united by their commitment to exploring such synergies. It is noteworthy that all of them are from the post-Mandal era, and that they shift the terms of the caste-class debate. Dhirubai Sheth offers an influential version of the post-Mandal perspective foregrounding the caste-driven divergence between the haves and have-nots in the era of liberalisation. His account of the 'caste-like hegemony' which the urban middle classes now exercise over the rest of society is a much needed corrective to the 'dominant caste' thesis that had dominated social science literature in the preceding decades. Anand Chakravarti's essay is a detailed ethnographic analysis of the ways in which caste identities sustain class identities and yet prove resistant to class mobilisation. It also highlights the distinctive role that caste continues to play in the organisation of the agrarian economy. Carol Upadhyay's contribution serves as an instructive reminder that caste can survive the transition to a globalised modernity. Her ethnographic study of the Information Technology (I-T) industry shows how, despite the displacements that it undergoes, caste remains a recognisable presence even in contexts where its irrelevance is constantly asserted. Ashwini Deshpande and

Katherine Newman report on a study that details the caste-related practices of active and passive discrimination that continue to shape the life chances of university graduates to this day. Along with the Upadhyaya essay, this contribution underlines the need to disentangle the ideological intertwining of 'merit' and caste. Exploring the opposite end of the employment spectrum—namely, degraded occupations—Meena Gopal demonstrates that caste and gender prejudices are active and essential elements in structuring and perpetuating the exploitative inequities of the 'informal sector'.

Taken together the essays in this section show us that the caste-class interface is capable of generating powerful synergies where caste actually reinforces class qua class without losing its own distinctive effectivity. They also demonstrate that this mutual reinforcement is not accidental but the product of identifiable social practices, including both micro practices of positive or negative discrimination and macro processes of structural inclusion and exclusion. Although they do not make this argument explicitly, they serve as reminders that it is precisely these durable inequalities that state policies like reservations are intended to redress.

Section Three: Caste and Politics

As a site of social science research the caste-politics interface initially appears to be the obverse of the caste-economy interface. Where class is expected to extinguish caste, electoral politics is seen as igniting it; and there is a constant incitement to think—in politics—the very synergy that is rendered unthinkable in the economy. But on closer examination these contrasts are revealed to be misleading because electoral politics in India was itself placed within a larger frame of incongruity. The standpoint for this larger frame was that of a normative western modernity, from whose perspective democratic elections in a 'traditional'

society like India seemed 'out of place'. From this vantage point, caste provided a reassuring explanation that relieved the tension of incongruity—this was not *modern* democracy after all, but a peculiar oriental variety. This was not simply western prejudice, because the strong undercurrent of ethical censure so palpable in early discussions of 'casteism' in politics was produced by internalised norms about an ascriptively unmarked modern liberal individual, who votes purely on rational 'merits'. But formal elections were not the only arena of relevance for the caste-politics interface; in the context of social movements of various kinds, caste and political rationality did not seem so self-evidently mutually exclusive.

Since the political aspects of caste have been among the oldest concerns of social science, it is not surprising that every decade from the 1960s to the 2010s is represented in this section. As it happens, the contributions here are evenly divided between the pre- and post-Mandal periods. Baldev Raj Nayar's study of voting behaviour in a reserved constituency of Punjab during the 1962 elections is part of the first systematic national election study. Nayar's study establishes that it was already clear in 1962 that 'the vote of the scheduled caste is full of subtleties', and that far from being a readymade vote bank, caste loyalties require assiduous cultivation and hard labour before they can be electorally harvested. The next two essays by Gail Omvedt and Mohan Ram are both from the 1970s and highlight the role of the so-called Shudra castes in shaping pre-Independence regional politics. In her study of the peasant agitation inspired by the Satyashodak Samaj founded by Jotiba Phule, Omvedt underlines the close interweaving of caste-based cultural practices and agitational strategies. Mohan Ram's essay on E. V. Ramaswamy Naickar and his role in the emergence of the Dravidian movement serves as a useful reminder of both the regional variations in the political histories of caste as well as the critical part played

in it by the non-Dalit lower castes later to be termed the OBCs.

The next pair of articles is about major anti-reservation movements led by the upper castes, underlining the fact that agitations against reservation have been more vociferous and aggressive than those in its favour. I. P. Desai's essay shows that the basic tactics of upper-caste opposition were worked out well before Mandal, including the ideological offensive invoking merit. K. Balagopal's short commentary is among the earliest pieces on the Mandal controversy that makes visible what cannot be seen from an upper caste point of view. One can see here the beginnings of the realisation that was to become commonplace in the following years, namely that in the absence of reservations, the normal rules of open competition are heavily tilted in favour of the upper castes for reasons that remain strongly caste-linked.

The following two essays bring into sharp relief the opposite sides of the Dalit question in politics: electoral clout and the 'atrocities'. Sudha Pai's comparative analysis of Dalit mobilisation in Uttar Pradesh under the BSP and in Madhya Pradesh under the Congress Party reiterates the point made by Baldev Raj Nayar four decades earlier, namely that the harnessing of caste for political ends is an arduous and complex affair requiring astute strategising apart from charismatic leadership. Anand Teltumbde's commentary on the Khairlanji killings where several members of an upwardly mobile Dalit family, the Bhotmanges, were murdered, serves as a bitter reminder of the continued vulnerability of Dalits regardless of their political visibility. It also draws attention to the fact that, a few exceptions apart, the resilient phenomenon of the 'caste atrocities' still awaits detailed social scientific analysis. The final piece in this section is a report on a South Asia wide survey of untouchability and caste discrimination. As Surinder Jodhka and Ghanshyam Shah

show, the phenomenon of untouchability is a ubiquitous presence whether or not it is officially recognised by the state. They also note in passing the bad faith involved in believing that untouchability is an exclusively Hindu practice.

Considered in retrospect, the essays in this section collectively offer an interesting insight. In so far as there seems to be no fundamental change in the political-electoral dimensions of caste across five decades, they tell us by implication that the politicisation (so to speak) of caste as an intellectual problem is distinct from the place that caste has had in politics. This is particularly true for electoral politics and perhaps a little less so for movements and hate crimes.

Section Four: Caste, Law and the State

Perhaps the biggest challenge faced by the Indian state has been that of translating into practice its formal commitment to the abolition of caste and caste discrimination, especially untouchability. As elaborated in Part II above, a disproportionate share of the efforts towards this end have been absorbed by the apparatus of reservations. And within the field of reservations, by far the most troublesome issue, especially in the legal context, has been that of the OBCs. Marc Galanter's excerpted essay which opens this section is devoted to explaining the legal and constitutional stakes involved in the definition of the OBCs. Since the late 1950s an unending stream of litigation, particularly in the southern states but also elsewhere, has ensured that the courts have played a significant part in determining the practical impact of reservations. Galanter's study, which formed part of his magnum opus *Competing Equalities*, provides a lucid account of this process. The second piece in this section is Balagopal's rueful commentary on the mala-led campaign to oppose the proposed sub-division of the SC quota in

Andhra Pradesh to allow hitherto underrepresented castes like the Madigas more equal access to its benefits. In his critique of the Supreme Court's verdict upholding the indivisibility of the SC quota, Balagopal lays bare the logic (or the lack thereof) in the arguments made and the ironic replication of the very same strategies earlier employed by upper castes to oppose quotas per se.

As already discussed, one of the problems with the reservations issue is that it has tended to dominate public discussion on caste inequalities and caste in general, restricting it to matters of narrow detail and procedure. This short sightedness occludes the much more important larger issues involved and, in fact, does little to resist the dominant ideology. It is against this background that we must evaluate the remarkable essay by Susie Tharu, Madhava Prasad, Rekha Pappu and K. Satyanarayana. They revive a strand of argument almost forgotten since Ambedkar's times which places reservations firmly within the original social contract that founded the nation. As a fundamentally political act, therefore, reservations were about power sharing rather than a special privilege granted to a minority community by a benevolent majority.

The last two essays in this section are about a different aspect of the state as a source of aggregative information through the Census. It is now a well-established claim in the social sciences that the modern state and its governmental technologies have played a major part in the formation and the stoking or quenching of identities. With respect to caste in particular, it is an old nationalist argument that the Census was part of a colonial policy of divide and rule. The enumeration of caste in British India, it is said, served only to breathe new life into a dying institution. Lending support to this view from a different direction are the more recent scholars who have gone so far as to argue that caste as we understand it today is more a colonial invention than a preserved relic from our past.

Padmanabha Samarendra's article is a recent application of this view and provides detailed analyses of specific regional practices and their implications. The essay by Satish Deshpande and Mary E. John takes the contrary view in trying to identify the advantages that accrue to the upper castes by virtue of their not being counted as such. In a context where it is only the inclusion of caste in the Census that is seen as consequential, it reminds us that the status quo of not counting caste is equally so.

Section Five: Caste and Gender

When compared to the different interfaces discussed above (those with class, politics and the state), the caste-gender interface has a very different location and history. The critical difference here is that gender has been *internal* to the social organisation of caste itself. The reproduction of caste is entirely dependent on the rules of endogamy, i.e. on prescriptive and proscriptive restrictions on marriage. When considered in terms of relations between castes close to each other in hierarchical ranking, it is once again rules of marriage (hypogamy and hypergamy) that are decisive. Finally, even in the case of informal and unspoken types of arrangements enabling or preventing sexual access to women for men, it is caste status that is regulative. Despite such a deep dependence on control over gender relations, caste has generally been theorised in implicitly male-centric terms, the only exceptions being instances of matriliney. A further historical twist is provided to this story in the modern era by the prominence of gender issues (even if in peripheral ways) in caste-related reform movements ranging from Satyashodhak in Maharashtra, Self Respect in Tamil Nadu, and the later efforts of Ambedkar, not to speak of various campaigns in Bengal. This public recognition of gender appears somehow to be largely forgotten in the post-Independence period, until it is rediscovered after Mandal. Indeed, one of the interesting

anomalies about the Mandal watershed is that it has provoked research on subjects bearing no relationship to the immediate events and issues of the controversy. Gender was (in retrospect) almost absent from this critical event, and yet, after Mandal, the intersection of caste and gender has become one of the more exciting research sites in caste studies.

This section is also an entirely post-1990s section. Uma Chakravarti's essay serves to establish the relevance of feminist perspectives for analysing the co-implication of caste and gender hierarchies in ancient India and their role in producing a resilient form of 'brahminical patriarchy'. Prem Chowdhry's extended analysis of the enforced regulation of marriage underwritten by hegemonic codes of patriarchal authority in rural Haryana shows that there is a remarkable continuity with the ancient structures described by Uma Chakravarti. Sharmila Rege's influential argument, which originated as a response to Gopal Guru's reflections on the predicaments of Dalit women, is important for its attempt to delineate a specifically Dalit feminist standpoint that seems to transcend the limitations of identity politics. Anandhi, Jeyranjan and Krishnan offer a compelling description of life in a village on the urban fringe of Chennai, and the unintended consequences for caste and gender relations brought about through rapid social changes via globalisation, industrialisation and urbanisation. Their essay also illustrates the counter-intuitive consequences for gender relations created by the erosion of older caste hierarchies. Rekha Raj's recent article is part of an ongoing effort to document the emergence of Dalit women as active political agents through the mediation of education, social movements and Christianity.

Section Six: Contemporary Explorations

Included in this final section is an eclectic set of essays that arguably provides a broad view of the shift in the intellectual stance towards caste triggered by Mandal. While each of these essays could perhaps have been included under some other theme, their contiguous presence in this section serves the purpose of illustrating the nuances of this shift. Two of the established themes in caste studies, namely untouchability and reservations, occur here along with the newer themes of the universalising of caste and the repositioning of the history of the nation. Whether old or new, each theme is treated here in an unmistakably contemporary style, that is, a style produced by and rooted in a specific conjuncture. One way of describing this conjuncture, would be through the term post-national. While this term has been accorded different meanings in recent social theory, the sense in which it is used here refers to a historical moment when the ideological hegemony of the nation and its state have lost their hold without losing their material efficacy.¹² A related and overlapping description could be in terms of the loss of a transition narrative discussed in Part II above. The overall implication is that today any overarching theme can work not in any exclusive way, but only partially and collegially with other such narratives.

The opening piece by Kancha Ilaiah may be thought of as a complement to Balagopal's commentary on Mandal. Born of the same moment, Ilaiah's essay provides a view of Mandal from the hitherto silent position of a beneficiary, a voice which in its directness and simplicity sidesteps debates on rules and procedures. Susie Tharu's much anthologised essay provides an insightful example of how caste may be 'read' in literary texts.¹³ She shows that when it comes to the Dalit subject, even the most universal and virtuous of categories like the mother is forcibly invested with a fatal moral ambivalence. The essays by Aditya

Nigam and M. S. S. Pandian address the vexed relationship between modernity and caste from different standpoints. Nigam is concerned with the counter-intuitive antagonism between the Dalit and secular left perspectives. While sympathetic to Dalit scholars who see Nehruvian modernism as a conspiracy, he wishes to stress the unintended ways in which the universalisms of emancipatory ideologies seem, almost inevitably, to harbour internal exclusions. Pandian's critical analysis of the self-positioning of non-Brahmin opponents of brahminical modernity argues that the lower castes are compelled to place themselves 'one step outside modernity'. It is only in this way that they can make space for their assertion and seek, at the same time, to be a step ahead of modernity. Satish Deshpande's essay attempts to shift the focus of attention from the hypervisible lower castes to the upper-caste subject, whose identification with the persona of the abstract universal citizen renders invisible his/her caste identity. In the concluding essay by Gopal Guru we have a courageous effort to foreground experience and its role in shaping the theory of untouchability and caste. Like every genuinely innovative exercise, this too demands our engagement and the willingness to risk our certainties.

Finally, it only remains to say what should go without saying: This anthology is intended to introduce the literature on caste that is available in the *EPW*; it is hoped that readers interested in particular issues or authors will go back to the original source to read the complete version.

There is only so much that an introduction can do, especially when it is introducing a large and varied collection of authors and perspectives. However elaborate it may be, a menu can only raise expectations and issue an invitation. What happens next is between the reader and the authors represented here.

SECTION

I

Disciplinary Perspectives

CASTE AS A STATUS GROUP*

IRAWATI KARVE

As in other places in the world, in India also status depends on a number of things like economic condition, birth, age, possession and conspicuous manifestation of certain qualities valued by society like learning, valour or saintliness, literary and artistic ability and power. Status rarely depends on any one of these things, nor is there ever complete accord as regards a scale of values for the attributes enumerated above. Status is not just a value system in the abstract but a value which receives concrete manifestation on innumerable occasions.[...]

A society almost never has a fixed system of values in which the social concept of status can be determined rigidly. In some respects, under certain historical circumstances, status may attain both clarity and fixity in certain respects. Thus, during the days of British rule in India, the status of an Englishman was always higher than that of an Indian, whatever the status of each might have been in his own social structure. This order of importance remained even when the Hindu Brahman thought he was polluted by the touch of the Englishman. An equally rigid definition of status has been in existence 'theoretically' in India for centuries. Though this does not apply in its entirety to the present Indian situation, the value-system of the structure has great effect on the thought aspirations and actions of different castes; and to acquire full knowledge of the present tensions, it is necessary to describe in short this traditional scheme of status.

THE 'FOUR-RANK' SYSTEM

In Sanskrit and in modern Indian languages, this scheme is called 'the four-rank system' (*chaturvarnasamstha*). The word *varna* has been taken by jurists, anthropologists and Indologists to mean 'class' which is correct. It is used in grammar to denote a class of letters, which may change in certain ways or take on certain prefixes, etc. In this context, *varna* does mean class without any connotation of rank. But in the social system called the *varna* system, the idea of rank predominates, and so in order to avoid misunderstandings arising from the word 'class' which is used widely for a different type of social system in Western society, and to bring out clearly the underlying idea of status, the word 'rank' has been used to denote *varna*.

The four-rank system has been very clearly described by Manu, who is supposed to be the first codifier of India. All other versions are expansions or modifications of the system as given by Manu.... Manu says, *jatis* (caste) are many while *varnas* (rank) are only four. The latter are (1) Brahman, (2) Kshatriya, (3) Vaishya and (4) Shudra, in that order. The first three are *dwija* (twice-born), i.e. have the right of going through the ritual of the thread ceremony, while the fourth rank has no such right. All the *jatis* are derived through marriages of people of different *varnas*.... When the mating is among men and women of different ranks from the four original primary ranks, we have hybrids of the first generation who give rise to certain castes. Their crossing with other hybrids or back into the original four ranks give us some more castes. And in this way the four *varnas* (ranks) and the vast number of *jatis* are connected through the mathematical process of permutation and combination, without much thought of actual investigation.

VARNA ENDOGAMY

The law of marriage, as enunciated by Manu was that people married within their varna and, that a man of a higher varna could marry a woman of a lower varna. The progeny in the latter case would belong to the varna of the father according to the patrilineal law of descent. This type of marriage was called *anuloma*. In modern anthropological terms, it is hypergamy. The marriage of a man of a lower varna to a woman of a higher varna was frowned upon.

Two things deserve to be noted in this account. (1) Manu's rule of marriage lays down varna-endogamy and not jati endogamy. He actually describes the ritual, etc. for the first three varnas and does not say anything about the internal structure of the fourth varna. (2) Manu's rule of anuloma marriage directly contradicts his attempt to derive castes (jatis) from intermarriage between varnas. If a child belonged to the varna of its father, how could innumerable jatis come into existence from the original four varnas? [...]

CASTE AND RANK IN MAHARASHTRA

A description of the position of caste and rank (varna) in Maharashtra will help one to understand what prevails in other regions of India. Each region reveals a slight variation depending, mainly on: (a) the history of the region; (b) the power and numerical strength—which, in the modern context, are sometimes synonymous—of the different castes; and (c) the safeguards offered by the Constitution. Of these factors, the historical one is very prominent in Maharashtra.

Maharashtra was under Muslim rule from the fourteenth century. As a ruling people, Muslims enjoyed the same type of precedence which the British did during their days of domination in this country. Within the Hindu society, Manu's four-fold ranking system modified in certain respects involving various rights and disabilities held sway, as can be seen from the available literature and political

and revenue documents. Manu's system was modified in two respects. Almost all the castes, with the exception of the brahman, were denied the right of the thread ceremony and thus made into shudras. Among the shudras a sub-class was in existence. This sub-class was made up of certain castes whose touch (even their shadow) was held to be polluting—this was the 'untouchable' rank. In literature, people wrote about the age-old four-rank system, but in effect there were only two varnas, viz brahman and shudra and a third one was later added—'the untouchables'.

SHIVAJI MADE A KSHATRIYA

In the seventeenth century, Shivaji fought successfully against the Muslim rulers of the south and against the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb and was crowned King of Maharashtra. [From] an account ... of the event [written by Sahhasada Bakhar in 1697, and edited and published in 1957 by Wakaskar at Baroda] ... we learn that in spite of the title of Raja being enjoyed by certain families of the Maratha caste, the caste itself was not recognised as kshatriya, nor did it go through a ceremony entitling it to be railed dwija. A search (?) revealed Shivaji to be of Rajput origin. This seems to have been the usual role of brahmans who raised in this way many shudra families to kshatriyahood. The thread ceremony had to be performed first, and it may be noted that the Raja was 44 years old at the time it was performed. (Generally it is performed before a boy attains 12 years of age).

UPGRADING OF CASTES

So a particular caste in Western Maharashtra, till then supposed to be shudra, became kshatriya. And in the society of Maharashtra three varnas were established. There was no vaishya varna, whose hereditary occupation was trade and shop-keeping. The poet Tukaram, a

contemporary of Shivaji, was Marathavani (trader) by caste. He called himself Kunbi, i.e. a caste-group belonging to the shudra varna. This system continued up to the British period. After the British were well established, they started recording castes of people, and almost from the time the first census was published people of different castes started complaining that their caste name was wrongly described and that the real name was something else. The 'real' name always contained a claim to brahmanhood or kshatriyahood by castes [which] were generally held to be shudras...[...]

CASTE-CLUSTERS

We thus see that, irrespective of the economic situation or influence, there are some traditional values attached to certain ranks and that it is the endeavour of the lower ranks to reach the higher. This endeavour, its nature and the character of the structure, need to be further clarified.

The four-varna system, as mentioned above, is based on the four primary ranks called brahman, kshatriya, vaishya and shudra. In Maharashtra, the rank called brahman includes all the castes which call themselves brahman of one sort or other. It is thus made up of one caste-cluster which goes under the name of brahman. The rank kshatriya is made up of the Maratha, kayastha, Khatri and numerous other castes like Somavamshi Vadval, Sahasrarjuna Vamshi Kshatriya Putwegar, Somavamshi Pathare Kshatriya, etc.

It will be seen that some of the older castes like Maratha and Kayastha do not have the word kshatriya as part of their caste label. The new claimants all have kshatriya added to the better-known caste names which had belonged to them before claiming the kshatriya varna. Second, even as regards the older ranks of kshatriya, they were made up of more than one caste-cluster. The same is the case with the rank called vaishya....

THE FOURTH VARNA

The author does not know of any caste in the shudra varna which uses the word 'shudra' as a part of the caste name. The word shudra has been applied to certain castes for centuries. People other than the shudras use it while talking about them; but the castes which are so designated never use it for themselves. They will give their caste name as Kumbhar, Parit, Mahar, etc.... The four-rank system was a creation of a ruling class which originally had a three-rank system in which, whatever the differences of rank, all people had the right to certain rituals and sacraments performed from birth to death. The fourth class was made up of a vast population outside the ranks of the conquerors. The former were given a name, and, barring that, the codifiers did not know much about the internal structure of the fourth rank.

The second peculiarity of this rank is that it contains more caste-clusters than any of the other three ranks. Besides, most of the artisan castes mentioned in the first article of this series, it also contains caste-clusters following the profession of fishermen, boatmen, shepherds, buffalo-herders, some types of cowherds and pig-keepers, as also all those castes which comprise landless tenants or agricultural labourers and some types of farmers. It contains thus over 50 caste-clusters, each cluster containing from five to over a dozen separate endogamous castes.

In yet another way is this varna peculiar. The castes labelled 'untouchable' also belonged to this varna. The theoretical equality (of which more will be said presently) of castes in a varna is so disturbed by this that instead of calling the untouchables a part of the fourth varna, in Tamilnad a new varna 'Panchama' (the fifth) was created for these.

Another phenomenon to remember about the varna system is that, while there was and still is great rivalry among the first three varnas, the fourth varna has not figured in it.

WHAT BENEFITS?

What does varna ranking mean socially? Is the ranking universally agreed to? What benefits does this ranking involve?

Taking the second question first, Sanskrit, Pali and Ardhamagadhi literature reveals that in different periods of Indian history and in different regions the varnas occupied different ranks. There was ancient rivalry between brahman and kshatriya which is revealed in brahmanical and Buddhist literature. The vaishyas came into their own with the blossoming of Jainism in Gujarat from the eighth to the fourteenth centuries.

The stereotypes one gets of these three varnas in early Vedic literature, in the two epics and the Puranas on the one hand, and in Buddhist and Jain literature on the other, are worth studying. The story/literature portraying folk sentiments is in a class by itself; and the stereotypes in this are slightly different from those of the literature mentioned above. These stereotypes ... are of two types: the judgment made by a caste about its own rank and its judgment about other castes. As noted above, in certain periods of history, there might have been such general accord as to make both the judgments coincide.

The stereotypes so created through the ages show that while the first three varnas have some positive and negative features attributed to them, the fourth varna invariably appears as a despised class. On very rare occasions does one get a glimpse of the evaluation by the fourth varna of any of the three upper varnas.[...]

There is general agreement that the brahman, kshatriya and vaishya rank above the shudra. As between the first three ranks themselves, there are differences of opinion. In Maharashtra, when asked about rank, the Maratha as a kshatriya claims a rank above that of the brahman. In actual practice, the brahman and the vaishya in many villages behave as if they were higher than the Maratha, i.e. neither of them will take food with the Maratha. Social relationship involves taking food with one another, exchanging daughters in marriage, being neighbours, being friends, etc. A recent study (not yet published) shows that while most of these activities are found among the castes belonging to the caste-cluster brahman and the varna brahman, there is not much inter-marriage among brahman castes. As regards other varnas, the intercourse among castes of the same varna becomes more and more restricted as one goes down the varna scale. The fundamental assumption of the ranking system, that people of the same rank are socially more closely knit, is not found to hold at all at present. Whether it was in existence in the old days needs careful investigation. Manu's rule about marriage of a boy and a girl belonging to the same varna without any reference to caste does not apply at all now in as much as most marriages are within a caste.[...]

NUMERICAL STRENGTH

Not only the actual varna ranking, but also the numerical strength of different varnas has a significance for the social structure of a region. In Maharashtra, the position at present is that there is a brahman varna making up about 9 per cent of the population; a kshatriya varna (comprising only the so-called blue-blooded Marathas) of about 30 per cent (this is purely conjectural); a vaishya varna (comprising mostly non-Marathi merchants) of about 5 per cent; and a shudra varna (including all the occupational

and service castes, kunbis and other small castes of agriculturists) of about 56 per cent, of which about 9 per cent belong to the Scheduled (formerly Untouchable) Castes. Most of this population is Hindu. In Tamilnad there is no kshatriya varna. The vaishyas form a numerically small community so that the percentage of shudras is far greater than in Maharashtra.

In Maharashtra, the flux of political and social affairs in the past 25 years has been such that the Marathas have tried to bring the agriculturist castes into a big political group to oppose the brahmans. The vaishyas try to remain away from politics if they can help it. The Scheduled Castes (SCs) have become a politically well-knit and significant minority, whose chief fight today is not so much with brahmans as with the Marathas. In Tamilnad, the non-brahman opposition did not secure the type of leadership which Marathas could offer because of their numerical strength and their historical role as the former ruling caste. While the Maratha leadership is threatened by rivalries among the Maratha leaders themselves, in Tamilnad the rivalries of various castes in the Shudra varna prevent a single leadership for non-brahmans.

PATTERN OF RELATIONSHIP

In different regions and sub-regions of India, the numerical strength of the varnas, the number of castes in each and the interrelation of the castes and varnas make for certain patterns of alliance, rivalry, avoidance and aloofness which need to be studied. In East Bengal and Sind, we had the extreme case of the four-varna system virtually vanishing. The upper varnas (brahmans and kayasthas in Bengal and the trading castes of Amil and Bhaiband and a few brahmans in Sind) were all that had remained of Hindu society. The lower varnas were either partly or wholly converted to Islam. The religious struggle became also a

class struggle in the modern connotation of the term. The exquisite flowering of modern Bengali literature, which shows a complete unawareness of the social situation and depicts the brahman and kayastha society in its glory and decadence, must be studied and interpreted in terms of the varna system and the inter-relation of the varnas.[...]

One cannot see what tangible social advantages a caste can gain now by calling itself kshatriya or vaishya or brahman. In modern India, there are opportunities for every man to gain education, wealth and power. Men of the higher varna may have better opportunities; but these are due to a better economic start than to any membership of a varna; and yet, it is equally obvious that people find a value in the old classification and wish to rise in terms of those classes while, at the same time, enjoying the benefits offered by the present society.

ENDOGENOUS UNIT: CASTE, NOT VARNA

The discussion above has made it clear that there is no mechanism for changing one's varna other than by claiming to belong to a higher varna and assuming that status. Such claims cannot be substantiated by marriage with the older castes in that particular varna because, whatever may be Manu's opinion, it is the caste and not varna that is the endogenous unit. There are no sanctions now as in olden times to substantiate or disallow such claims. No caste of any varna, be it brahman or kshatriya, wishes to get involved in controversies and hatreds by disputing such claims. The older kshatriyas keep to themselves as an inter-marrying unit, whatever the new accretions to the kshatriya varna. Thus, in Andhra, a fisher and boatman caste (Pallikara) has started calling itself 'Agnikula Kshatriya'. It has public trusts registered in that name, but no old kshatriya family of Andhra even dreams of a day when there might be inter-marriage between them

and these Agnikula Kshatriyas. Thus there is no marriage between different castes claiming one varna.[...]

The question of rank is not exhausted with the classical ranking system. There are differences of rank between castes in a caste-cluster in a varna, and between parts of one and the same caste.

CASTE-CLUSTERS AMONG SHUDRAS

The occurrence of distinction of rank among castes belonging to the same varna but to different caste-clusters is easy to understand. This is seen especially in the fourth rank where the appellation of shudra is not taken by any caste or caste-cluster. The main feature which divides all shudras into two separate classes is, as already mentioned, that there are some caste-clusters among shudras which are held to be untouchable. This distinction divides castes of all varnas into two distinct groups for certain aspects of social life. The division between the touchable and untouchable is far more significant than the division between non-shudra and shudra. The number of untouchable castes within the shudra varna increases as one goes from the north to the south.

It may be noted here in passing that though untouchability has been made illegal by our Constitution, it flourishes all over Maharashtra and south India in its old form of separate housing areas and wells in almost all villages. The efforts made by the government to ameliorate the condition of these castes have led to an increase in the social distance between them and others. The Bombay government (and probably other state governments too) have a number of hostels for SC students which set them effectively apart from the rest of the student world. Generous building grants have given rise to habitation areas called 'Jawaharnagar' and 'Gandhigram' well away from the old townships and tended to increase not only the

social, but also the physical, distance between the touchables and untouchables. Almost all over the world, the difference between the higher and lower rank is manifested by physical distance in the form of different habitation areas. In south India, this was developed into a science, and the distance at which a man of a particular caste had to stand in order to speak to a brahman was fixed in yards. This distance, while fixing the level of the speaker vis-a-vis the brahman, also placed each caste in an extremely precise ranking system.

Among the untouchable shudras as also among the touchable ones, there is a ranking in caste-clusters. In Maharashtra, the three untouchable caste-clusters of Chamar, Mahar and Mang do not live in the same habitation area as neighbours, and the ranking is in the order indicated. The Mala and Madiga in Andhra also have separate habitation areas in each village, and there is great rivalry, amounting almost to hatred, between these two Untouchable groups. This rivalry is intensified by the fact that the malas are under the protection of the Reddi agriculturist caste, while the madigas are protected by the Gwala cowherds.

RANKING AMONG SHUDRAS

Among the touchable shudras, caste-clusters like those of Sonar (goldsmith), Sutar (carpenter), Parit (washerman), Nhavi (barber), etc. have ranks. The goldsmith claims a higher rank than the others. The parit or washerman ranks very low. The barber ranks high in north India and low in south India. This ranking holds good of a wide area. Sometimes, however, the exact rank of a caste may change from village to village. The Ramoshi caste is deemed touchable in Poona district, while it is held to be untouchable in certain parts of Satara district. Members of the Dhangnr (shepherd) caste claim to be kshatriyas and

rank high in some parts of Maharashtra while in other parts they are definitely lower than kunbis. In the three higher varnas, brahmans of different castes have their own ideas about rank, but rarely is that idea given expression to publicly. Certain castes, however, are looked upon as being mere claimants to brahmanhood and not real brahmans at all. Thus, the membership of the Brahman Sabha of Bombay (founded in 1888 and still active) is open only to certain brahman castes and not to others. The same is true of the kshatriyas. Taking into consideration old Sanskrit accounts and incidents like the crowning of Shivaji, one may assume that the process of such castes as claim a higher rank being considered as outsiders for some time and then, when opportunity offered, being accorded recognition, must have taken place again and again in India.

RANK WITHIN CASTE

This brings us to the existence of rank within a caste. It is again of two types—a simple and generally not very rigid division of a caste into one section higher in rank than the other. Almost all brahman castes display such a division, based on whether a brahman is a well-to-do person, i.e. a landlord, a man in the so-called liberal professions or one versed in various branches of ancient learning like philosophy, logic, grammar, etc. or whether a brahman pursues priestcraft for a living. The former consider themselves higher than the latter, but poverty may lead a member of the former division to take up a priest's vocation while families of priests may become members of the first class. In Marathi, the first division is called 'Grihastha' and the second 'Bhikshuk'.

In Bengal, apart from the broad distinction between 'Vaishyaik' and 'Yajmani' brahmans, corresponding to those in Maharashtra, brahmans fell into two divisions. The

‘Kulin’ was the higher division and the ‘non-Kulin’ the lower. ‘Kaulinya’ was liable to be lost or tarnished by marriage with lower ranks. And so few of the Kulins remained of the purest stock that it was usual for them ... to marry many wives. This practice became almost a racket in Bengal. A kulin groom married as many non-kulin girls as he could, extracting dowry from each....[...]

The primary implication of a hierarchical structure is that those of the lower rank try to rise to a higher rank. Certain conditions (e.g. foreign rule) seem to be favourable to such attempts. In the social ladder, there are also certain points which seem to be more attractive to the climber than others. Such, for example, seems to be the rank of kshatriyas. There is internal ranking within a caste which seems to be of two types, one represents a passing disturbance of the equality inherent in castes, while the other seems to represent a more important device of caste-making. The social injustices imposed by the rank system have not been discussed, not because they are of no importance but because they have been very well described by other writers.

THE FUTURE OF INDIAN CASTE*

M. N. SRINIVAS

I n discussing caste, I shall be making a broad distinction between traditional and modern caste which roughly coincides with the distinction between the pre-British period on the one hand and British and post-British period on the other. Pre-British caste was very largely rural, though cities have been a feature of Indian culture since the days of Harappa and Mohenjodaro. But pre-British cities were very few, and they were quite different from modern cities. But even today 80 per cent of the population live in villages, and it is expected that even in the year 2000 AD, 70 per cent of Indians will be living in villages. But the links which exist today between villages and towns are many and intimate, and they have to be studied in relation to each other. Poor immigrants from rural areas perform a variety of semi-skilled and skilled jobs in urban areas and populate the slums which lie cheek by jowl with more prosperous areas. The rural poor articulate a different network to have access to various resources including education and urban jobs. While the middle classes regard villages as generally recipients of forces from urban areas, it is well to remind ourselves that it was the villages of north India who threw out the Congress and brought in the Janata at the general elections of 1977.

I shall first consider briefly rural caste. I shall do this by presenting its main features as they were described by Edmund Leach in a thought provoking introduction to 'Aspects of Caste in India, Ceylon and NorthWest Pakistan' (Cambridge 1960). The introduction also includes Leach's evaluation of the changes which have occurred in taste in

the twentieth century and that is also relevant for my purpose. I shall state Leach's arguments in his own words especially as I differ from him radically on some points.

Leach regarded 'dominant caste' as a universal and integral element in the rural caste system. According to him, the members of the dominant caste not only owned land but enjoyed numerical majority over the others.¹ Leach also assumed that in pre-British India, landowners competed among themselves for the labour and services of the other castes, and since caste was inseparable from if not inconceivable without a system of hereditary division of labour, the grouping of people into different castes forced them to co-operate with each other for performing basic economic and social tasks. The interests of the different castes therefore necessarily converged. Going further, he argued that competition between members of different caste was uncharacteristic of the system and wrote,

... it is precisely with these inter-caste relationships that we are concerned when we discuss caste as a social phenomenon. The caste society as a whole, in Durkheim's sense, is an organic system with each particular caste and sub-caste filling a distinctive functional role. *It is a system of division of labour from which the element of competition among the workers has been largely excluded.* The more conventional sociological analysis which finds an analogy between castes, status groups, and economic classes puts all the emphasis on hierarchy and upon the exclusiveness of caste separation. *Far more fundamental is the economic interdependence which stems from the patterning of the division of labour which is of a quite special type.* (p. 5, emphasis mine)

Leach then proceeded to distinguish between caste and class;

It is a characteristic of class-organised societies that rights of ownership are the prerogative of minority groups which form privileged elites. The capacity of the upper class minority to “exploit” the services of the lower class majority is critically dependent upon the fact that the members of the underprivileged group must compete among themselves for the favours of the elite. It is the specific nature of a *caste* society that this position is reversed. *Economic roles are allocated by right to closed minority groups of low social status*; members of the high-status “dominant caste”, to whom the low-status groups are bound, generally form a numerical majority and must compete among themselves for the services of individual members of the lower “castes”. (p. 56, emphasis mine)

In a class system, social status and economic security go together—the higher the greater; in contrast, in a caste society, status and security are polarised.... In a class society the “people at the bottom” are those who have been forced there by the ruthless process of economic competition; their counterparts in a caste society are members of some closely organised kinship group who regard it as their privileged right to carry out a task from which all other members of the total society are rigorously excluded. (p. 6)

Leach concluded by declaring categorically that:

... wherever caste groups are seen to be acting as corporations in competition against like groups of *different caste*, then they are acting in defiance of caste principles. (p. 7)

I shall now elaborate on a few points made by Leach. In the first place, it should not be forgotten that he has in mind traditional or pre-British India. The population of India even around 1820 was about 120 million which is a far cry from the 630 million or so of today.² This meant that labour and skills were scarce relative to land. The so-called low castes had a monopoly over their traditional occupations. Even as recently as 1947, I noticed in Rampura village in old Mysore State a sense of pride in the ancestral occupation and in the fact that the skills involved in its practice were esoteric and not available to outsiders.³ The right to provide priestly services to a group of villages was treated as if it were real property subject to be alienated temporarily or permanently, or divided among heirs. A dominant or other high-caste leader who founded a village or chiefdom was obliged to invite members from the artisan, servicing and labouring castes with offers of land and other incentives in order to make the village or chiefdom viable. Further, every group of villages had its own weekly market which provided a venue for its surplus, and also enabled it to buy or exchange the goods it wanted.

It is true that the landowner was regarded as the *yajaman* or patron, superior in wealth and status, to those who worked for him, but patronship in traditional India did not only confer rights but carried with it onerous duties towards clients. The term 'patron' has acquired a bad odour in the last 30 years or so but this is due to concentration on the 'exploitative aspect' of patronship while at the same time ignoring its protective aspect.

Inter-caste interdependence was frequently reinforced by factionalism. The village patrons were generally in a relationship of mutual rivalry but that did not prevent them from coming together to form a faction against a similar combination of patrons. Each patron carried his clients with him into his faction. While the membership of factions

was unstable, factionalism itself was inseparable from rural life. Factions were generally multi-caste in composition but the degree of mix of the local castes differed from faction to faction depending upon a variety of factors which it is not necessary to go into here.

I shall now mention the drawbacks in Leach's view of rural caste. Leach's assumption that there is everywhere a dominant caste enjoying numerical majority over the other castes lacks empirical support. Its applicability to traditional India is even more doubtful, for in many parts, the landowners frequently came from ritually high-status castes such as the Brahmins and Kshatriyas, and were sharply distinguished from the dominant peasant castes. One of the major results of land reform has been the transference of land from the ritually high-status castes to the dominant peasant castes which had a tradition of agriculture and lived in rural areas. The dominant castes, which are, incidentally, among the biggest beneficiaries of Independence, were able to escape the more lethal effects of land reforms because of their hereditary occupation, and their tendency to live in extended kin groups. The ritually high-status castes, in contrast, frequently lived in urban areas, and provided a significant component of the absentee landowner class.

Leach assumes that every village had several castes including the dominant, but even today a majority of Indian villages have a population of less than 500 each, which means they probably do not have more than three or four castes.⁴ Besides, all over the country there are to be found villages inhabited by single castes such as the potters, weavers, washermen, shepherds, fishermen, hunters and so on. The big, multi-caste villages occur largely in the prosperous irrigated areas.

Leach has described caste as it functions at the micro or grassroots level, and one would expect that it would have

led him to a dynamic view of the institution for it is the intensive study of villages by social anthropologists that brought out the mobility inherent in the caste system as it actually operated in contrast to caste as it was conceived of in the sacred literature. The contrast between the 'book view' and the 'field view' is a profound but well-established one. From the 'field view' of caste it can be inferred that the system provided for a certain amount of mobility, i.e. while a few castes moved up or down, the system as a whole remained stable. A view such as this naturally leads one to investigate the sources of mobility and this in turn reveals the links between phenomena at the micro and higher levels. The micro-level view is a legitimate one for heuristic purposes but one cannot forget its links with phenomena at the higher levels or with historical events.

I have discussed at length the sources of mobility in the caste system elsewhere⁵ and I shall rest content here with stating that there was fluidity at the lower levels of the political system in pre-British India which made it possible for leaders of dominant castes to capture political power at the villages or higher levels and become chieftains (Nalegar, Nayak, etc.). The possession of political power generally resulted in the possessor's claiming to be a kshatriya and further strengthening his claim by securing the services of genealogists and bards (Bhats, Charans and Vahivanchas), and of brahmins. This was in turn followed by suitable alterations in the lifestyles and ritual of the successful persons, a process which I have referred to as Sanskritisation. The kshatriya category was the most open one in the caste system though it was much more popular in the north than in the south. It is my hunch that the categories of brahmins and Vaishyas were also open though not probably to the same extent as the kshatriyas. This view of caste makes each twice-born *varna*, or all-India caste category (derived from the 'book view'), at least in

some cases the result of striving and achievement over long periods of time. (Bailey and others who described caste as 'a closed system of social stratification' were guilty of totally ignoring the historical processes which went to make up local hierarchical systems.)

The frequent occurrence of protest movements against caste throughout Indian history provided yet another source of mobility. These rebel sects rejected the ideas of brahmanical supremacy, the performance of elaborate rituals, and the punctilious observance of the rules of pollution and purity, and they instead emphasised the love of god and right conduct as indispensable to salvation. It is not surprising that the protest sects attracted followers from a wide range of castes from rebel brahmins to Untouchables. It is sad that in emphasising caste and hierarchy, we (i.e., Indian scholars), have failed to take note of the significance of anti-caste and anti-brahmin movements in Indian history. We have been like one-eyed camels concentrating on the fodder available on one side of the avenue while ignoring the fodder on the other side. *Caste and anti-caste are both part of a single phenomenon, and those who wish to root the idea of human dignity and equality in Indian soil would do well to go to these historical sources of protest and build on them.* But the pity of it is that our intellectuals are not only alien to rural India but are both contemptuous and patronising in their attitude towards rural people and their culture. Educating our intellectuals ought to be a task of high priority.

But the reason for my bringing in the protest sects is to show that they offered opportunities for mobility to members of the so-called low castes. There is ample evidence for this but the full sociological significance of the protest sects has not yet been assessed.

It can now be seen that even traditionally competition between castes did occur in the struggle for power and for mobility. In the former case, it was necessary for the caste

in question to be numerically strong and have a tradition of fighting. Several castes besides the dominant peasant castes had both. Though at the village level the local sections of different castes—or, more correctly, households—co-operated for agricultural production and for pursuing social and cultural ends, competition did occur at the higher levels for seizing political power and for achieving mobility, and Leach's view that competition between castes is uncharacteristic of the traditional caste system is, in my opinion, totally wrong.

II

I have discussed the main changes which caste has undergone in modern India in my earlier writings, and I shall try here only to recapitulate a few significant points to characterise the nature of the changes which have occurred and their implications.

No account of the changes which occurred in caste during the British period can ignore the emergence of nationalism among the educated Indians in urban areas. But historians and political scientists until very recently have viewed nationalism only as it manifested itself at the highest level, and even there, have concentrated on its political aspects. But to a social anthropologist nationalism appears as a form of self-consciousness pervading the entire society, and sharpening identities at all the nodal points in the social structure. It is no accident then that the pervasive self-consciousness which nationalism produced affected caste also. It manifested itself in the attempt of the so-called lower castes to take over the customs, practices and rituals of the higher castes, and in their claiming high status for themselves in the local hierarchy. The decennial census had the unintended effect of providing opportunities to ambitious castes for altering their names and reporting myths in support of their claim to high status indicated in

the new names. The 1901 Census was the high point in such deception as word got round that the Census authorities, which meant in effect the Government of India, was going to determine precisely the rank of each caste. (Sociologically speaking, this showed colossal misunderstanding of the nature of caste on the part of Risley and other British ICS officials. Nebulousness in mutual ranking is of the essence of caste system in operation as it is a pre-condition for mobility.)

People living in the big port towns and coastal areas perceived the importance of knowledge of English and western education for securing jobs in the new administration, entering the professions, and for commerce and trade. Access to education became crucial for secular mobility though eventually secular mobility had to be translated into caste terms. This was necessary for a variety of purposes including the connubial.

When the British started parting with power to Indians on an instalment basis, access to power replaced access to education in terms of its importance to mobility. Initially this meant seeking the favour of the British who were understandably interested in perpetuating their rule and in building defences against growing nationalism which they identified with educated brahmins or upper-caste Hindus. It was understandable that under the circumstances the British should pursue a policy of lending their support to all minorities and vested interests, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Anglo-Indians, Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), Parsis and the princes. The results of British policy are now a matter of history but I would like to comment briefly on only one element of it.

In the south of India, for instance, caste quotas for government jobs and seats in educational institutions were introduced as early as 1920s. There was a strong feeling among the better off and more influential members of the non-Brahmin castes that the brahmins who constituted a

mere 3 or 4 per cent of the population had a near monopoly of higher education and government jobs and were over-represented in the professions. This view was strengthened by an anti-brahmin ideology which made the brahmin out to be an Aryan in contrast to the indigenous Dravidians, a representative of the imperial Sanskrit as against Tamil, and the author of the caste system. But when the nationalist movement became very powerful in the 1930s, under Gandhiji's leadership, the leaders of the non-brahmin movement joined the Congress.

Under the Constitution of Independent India, the SCs and STs have been given, in proportion to their numbers, reservation of seats in the legislatures at all levels, and jobs in the government, and seats in educational institutions. (Now reservation has been extended to promotions as well.) While reservation for SCs and STs is constitutionally guaranteed there is another category of castes called the Other Backward Classes (OBC), and it is left to each state to determine which castes should be included in this category, and to take suitable steps for improving their condition. As I have said earlier, the southern states have a history of quotas for the backward classes, and since Independence, Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu set up commissions to review all aspects of backwardness and to suggest new measures to ensure that the benefits and concessions available to the backward classes reached the poorer castes subsumed under the OBC, and not monopolised by the more powerful ones. Karnataka, for instance, has distinguished between 'backward' and 'more backward' castes, whereas Kerala has used the terms, 'backward' and 'most backward' to make an identical distinction. It must be mentioned here that the OBCs are an extremely heterogeneous category consisting at one extreme of powerful, landed and prosperous dominant castes, and at the other, of poor, artisan and servicing castes such as barbers, washermen, potters, basketry-makers, fishermen,

etc. Karnataka, which is perhaps more radical than all the other states in the matter of quotas and concessions given to the OBCs, has used the twin criteria of caste and economic backwardness to determine who really are the disadvantaged. In Karnataka, nearly 60 per cent of seats in educational institutions, and jobs in the government are set apart under various categories, SCs, STs, OBCs, offspring of defence personnel and of MIAs, and physically handicapped candidates. The net result is that only 40 per cent of jobs and seats in educational institutions are open to merit.

While in the southern states the principle of caste quotas have been accepted for nearly six decades, they appear to be absent in the northern states except for the constitutionally guaranteed reservations for the members of the SCs and STs. The recent efforts of the Janata government in Bihar to reserve 30 per cent of the government jobs for the members of the backward classes has met with violent resistance from the higher castes. One of the reasons—only one, let me repeat—for the relative ease with which the principle of caste quotas was introduced in the south was the high visibility of a small elite group which had benefited greatly from English education and which provided a focus for others to unite against. In the northern states, on the other hand, there is no such small elite, and the matter is further complicated by the presence of several numerically strong high castes which stand to lose from job reservation for the backward classes. If the latter turn violent, inter-caste fighting is likely to become an everyday affair.

I would like to comment here briefly on the recent and widespread occurrence of bloody fighting between caste Hindus and the SCs. Such incidents have been reported from Uttar Pradesh (UP), Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, and elsewhere. As a result of the various measures of 'protective discrimination' adopted towards them, there

has emerged everywhere small groups of educated SC youths who deeply resent the attitudes of the higher castes towards them. Some of this resentment has found expression in the writings in Marathi of the Dalit Panthers in Maharashtra, comprising educated Mahars who, or whose parents, became Buddhists in the 1950s following the leadership of the late B. R. Ambedkar, who ended his lifelong career of protest by becoming a cabinet minister at the Centre, and was one of the chief draftsmen of the Indian Constitution.

Besides the educated youth, all over the country there has been a sharp rise in the self-consciousness among the SCs, and this makes them highly critical of the higher castes, and regard the benefits, concessions and reservations given to them under the Constitution as only a small acknowledgement on the part of the society of the grave injustice that it has done to the SCs over the millennia. At the same time, upper-caste youths, who do very well in examinations but find that they are passed over for SCs with lower marks for seats in highly competitive professional courses of study and for jobs, become bitterly anti-Harijan. I fear that they might embrace violent ideologies which promise to overthrow the existing order. No society can afford to alienate and embitter its most gifted elements, least of all a developing country such as India but then there is no easy way out of the cruel national dilemma between equality and excellence.

Given such diametrically opposed attitudes I envisage in the immediate future increased conflict between caste Hindus and SCs in every part of India irrespective of the party in power. I am afraid the Indian road to equality *is* going to be marked by bloody clashes between different castes, though caste may to some analysts appear to be a 'false' category unlike class.

III

During the last six decades or more, there is increasing realisation among the people that access to power is crucial for securing access to resources. But power does not only have an instrumental value: it is also valued as an end a mystique, and recognition of any kind of achievement has to be by the government or its representatives. That is why the presence of a minister is thought to be essential to mark any important occasion or confer legitimacy on any kind of achievement. Even men in ochre robes like to be seen with men wearing khaddar, and vice versa. The way people fawn on the powerful, and the very next minute discourse on the hoary tradition of Indian spirituality is too common to deserve comment.

But the realisation of the criticality of power did result in what may be called the coming together of cognate *jatis* or endogamous units to form caste conglomerates which acted as pressure groups in political and economic contexts. In a democracy, numbers mean strength and if in pre-British India, small groups of kin fissioned off from their parent groups for purposes of enhancing their economic opportunities, in modern India cognate castes have to fuse together to achieve power. If fission characterised traditional caste, fusion characterises modern caste. Cognate castes come together initially as a matter of political convenience but gradually marital links are established between leading kin groups in each constituent jati. In establishing such alliances, class and lifestyle factors are important. Thus an educated son from a peasant caste might not find a suitable bride in his original endogamous group and might be forced to seek a bride in a cognate jati. Since dowry has spread to peasant, and in some areas even to Harijan castes, consideration of the size of the dowry frequently force people to cross the pristine endogamous lines. I have referred to the phenomenon of

the coming together of cognate jatis by the term 'horizontal stretch'. 'Horizontal stretch' has resulted in the emergence of huge, monster castes such as Jats, Alms, Rajputs, Okkaligas, Lingayats, etc. and they play a vital role in state politics, and through politics in the allocation of resources, and in the distribution of benefits to followers. In each state there are several castes which constantly jockey for power, and the caste idiom is ubiquitous in mobilising people. This occurs in spite of the fact that castes are economically and socially heterogeneous, and that frequently the most bitter rivalries exist within a caste. A 'consciousness of kind' is shared by members of a caste and it is pointless to dismiss this as 'false consciousness'.

I am aware that 'horizontal stretch' is more characteristic of the higher castes than of the so-called lower, but even the latter come together occasionally to articulate their interests. Politicians have a vested interest in bringing them together for they are very necessary for promoting their careers. But the endogamous groups which come together are really not equal, for even when public opinion recognises that some jatis are part of a much bigger jati, each constituent unit claims to be superior to the others. It is inherent in the nature of the caste system that there are no equals. 'Horizontal stretch' therefore implies to some extent a vertical stretch.

The groups which have emerged today as castes, and are competing with each other for obtaining access to power, etc. are different from the local sections of the different castes in the traditional system, but even today in the village diverse castes continue to come together for agricultural production. But even here changes are occurring in the sense that cash payments are replacing old patron-client relationships, and rural-urban links are becoming closer. The members of the SCs may refuse to perform certain services and the hereditary headman and accountant have disappeared in many parts of the country.

Commercial agriculture had sharpened economic disparities between the rich and poor in many areas, and cheaper labour is frequently invited from outside to beat down local labour.

To sum up: The caste groups which are emerging in urban areas and which are in competition with each other for obtaining access to power and resources bear very little resemblance to traditional caste in rural India. But as against this it should be noted that even today agricultural production requires the co-operation of several castes, and even traditionally competition between different castes did occur though it was not very common. The use of the caste idiom is widespread, though the idea of hierarchy is being increasingly rejected by those groups traditionally confined to the bottom. (The state also has opted for egalitarianism as an end to be pursued.) It is no use saying, as Leach says, that present-day castes have ceased to be such. The situation is much more complicated than that. There are continuities and discontinuities, and social anthropologists have to reconcile themselves to work in fuzzy areas where not only boundaries are not clear but where multiple and contrary forces are at work. What Leach stated in a quite different context⁶ is peculiarly appropriate here:

I do not want to suggest that we have *all* become out and out rationalists in the Levi-Straussian manner. On the contrary and particularly in Cambridge..., the tradition of British empiricism has been most staunchly upheld, but there is now a much greater willingness to recognise that the way we cut up the empirical cake for the purposes of analysis is a matter of convenience rather than something that is given by nature, and that however we choose to make discriminations between one social system and another there will always be a fuzziness at the edges, and that it is in this fuzzy

boundary area, where our typological assumptions do *not* fit, that the problems of real theoretical interest are likely to be found.

I would only add that in the case of caste, 'fuzziness' permeates the entire system. Those who want to deal only with tidy areas and who seek clear-cut answers ought to go elsewhere.

CONTINUOUS HIERARCHIES AND DISCRETE CASTES*

DIPANKAR GUPTA

In the preceding sections we attempted to make the following points:

1. Any notion of hierarchy is arbitrary and is valid from the perspective of certain individual castes. To state that pure hierarchy is one that is universally believed in, or one which legitimises the position of those, who participate in the caste system, is misleading.

2. The separation between castes is not only on matters which connote the opposition between purity and pollution. Distinctions and diacritical notches which are not even remotely suggestive of purity and pollution are observed as strictly. Obversely, distinctions related to purity and pollution do not systematically affect caste status.... Further, it is only after we accept castes as discrete are we in a position to understand why castes equally pure refrain from merging their identities. The *nahashakha* group of castes provides us with a telling example of this phenomenon. This also explains why inconsistencies in caste behaviour do not trouble the Hindus, as Srinivas noted while studying the Coorgs.

We are now in a position to quickly review the implications of the above for some major issues that dominate studies of the caste system.

THE JAJMANI SYSTEM

The *jajmani* system, in theory, establishes, and indeed orders, religious protocol for the exchange of services

between different castes specialising in different occupations. But, in fact, this system is a sporadic empirical reality. Even Dumont concedes this, but he is soon compelled to add that economic services and religious prestations are mingled together and 'this takes place within the prescribed order, the religious order' (Dumont 1972: 147). But this is possible only if each caste follows its hereditary occupation which has been sanctified in the sacred texts. But surprisingly, the sacred texts do not mention a larger number of jatis in existence today, and if it had been the job of sacred texts to clearly identify jatis with occupations then this was done very carelessly.

To begin with, let us examine the agricultural castes which are so numerous and are constantly increasing in number every day. In the prime sacerdotal text, the *Manusmriti*, no 'prominence is given to ... either land-owning or agricultural castes or the corresponding occupations, though a large part of the population must then, as now, have consisted of cultivators, and their importance in the social system must have been great' (Blunt 1969: 232). Further castes who claim different origins, some like the Kurmis who claim Kshatriya status, others like Bhumihars and Tagas who claim Brahman status, are also 'traditionally landholders' (ibid.). The number of those castes whose caste names are clearly non-agricultural but who are moving into agriculture is constantly being enhanced (ibid.: 251, 252; Bose 1975: 192-93, 198; with reference to Untouchables see Desai 1976: 162). Even brahmans, as Bougle found, are not only ploughmen, but soldiers, tradesmen and cooks (Bougle 1958: 19). The suggestion that if a caste which follows an occupation which is neither hereditary nor sanctioned in the texts is either degraded or ex-communicated must necessarily be rejected. Even brahmans such as the Tewaris, Ojhas, Upadhyayas or Jhas have engaged in agriculture without losing caste (see Risley 1981, vol. 1:

29). As one brahman is reported to have confessed to Abbe Dubois: 'To fill one's belly one must play several parts' (Bougle 1958: 19). If this is true for the brahmans it should be equally true for the other castes as well. Ultimately, the castes that cling to their traditional occupations the most are those 'which deal most with trade questions ... the Bhangi, the Nai, the Bhishti, the Darzi (Blunt 1969: 245), the drummer, the washerman, etc. (Dumont and Pocock 1958: 474-78). Not surprisingly when any attempt is made to elucidate the jajmani system, the authors invariably deal with these castes alone.

The jajmani system, in other words, is an idealisation which in fact works out in a somewhat pure form only in a small minority of cases. This further strengthens our view that castes achieve their separation not primarily by the criterion of occupation as supposedly recommended in the texts, but in fact distinguish themselves from each other hyper-symbolically by a cluster of characteristics, the more important of which need not be recommended by the ideology of the true hierarchy.[...]

SANSKRITISATION

The concept of Sanskritisation very imperfectly understands the incongruence between deemed occupation and actual occupation. Any move on the part of the lower castes to appropriate lifestyles that were not traditionally theirs is interpreted as if these lower castes are ashamed of their identity. In some cases this might be true, but in fact when subaltern castes claim elevated caste status it is a phenomenon; often independent of Sanskritisation. Sanskritisation is a re-assertion in an extraverted form of what was till then an introverted expression of the caste's overall rejection of the position given to it by the hierarchical *rule* governed by the twin principles of economics and politics. But only in rare cases, if ever at all,

do these castes want to give up their identity. They only seek to be relieved from the duress they were placed under in the prevailing hierarchical rule, and for the first time asserting what they have always believed to be their rightful status. They are successful when they have access to the axes of economics and politics (Lynch 1968), as in the case of the Jatavs of Agra, or the Izhavas of Kerala, or the distiller caste groups of Orissa and Tamil Nadu. The importance of the economic factor cannot be over-emphasised for very often the claims of the well-to-do sections of a depressed jati are accepted by the powerful and dominant castes, while the identical claims of their indigent jati brethren do not win such acceptance. The prosperous Noniyas, for instance, were accepted by the privileged castes as Chauhans but the poorer noniyas were not accorded similar status. These poorer noniyas, nevertheless, did not abandon their claim that they were really Chauhans (Rowe 1968: 68). Sanskritisation, seen thus, is an extraversion of a long-standing, deeply felt, and believed in judgment of their caste status which was hitherto privy only to members of that caste.

If Srinivas imperfectly understood this phenomenon through the optic of Sanskritisation, Dumont did not understand it at all, for in his case the true hierarchy is paramount and castes have no business to do otherwise. Dumont realised the difficulties his true hierarchy would face, so he introduced power and economics surreptitiously at the interstitial levels. But if castes are seen as discrete classes, there is no need to make this shamefaced concession. And in any case, mobility and transfer of occupation for economic and political purposes occurs both at the lowest level as also at the highest and not only at the interstitial level. It is worthwhile to recall the case of the proud and land-owning brahmans we mentioned earlier in this essay, as also the case of the so-called Untouchable claiming brahman status.

If jatis can independently and idiosyncratically set up objects of veneration, then by equal facility they can also set up independent models for emulation, or Sanskritisation. These objects of veneration and ritual practices are not always recommended by brahmans but are devoutly adhered to, nevertheless, by both the privileged and powerful jatis as well as by the subaltern ones. Likewise, non-brahmanical models of Sanskritisation carry as much commitment as the brahmanical model. It is not as if jatis choose the non-brahmanical mode 'shamefacedly' as a second best choice (Dumont 1972: 30). The brahmanical lifestyle and symbols do not excite universal favour among many jatis. As a matter of fact, the kshatriya, or Rajput, or Jat model contains an inbuilt hostility to brahmans which is in line with the sentiments of these caste groups. This hostility is *sans* envy, as the Rajput lkshwaku clan myth or even the myth of Parasuram demonstrates. The pride and the generic swagger that are built into the 'I-am-a-Rajput' syndrome (Hitchcock 1975: 10) cannot by a long stretch be considered shamefaced. Neither is the Patidars' transference of loyalty from the kshatriya model to the Vaishya (or Baniya) model (Srinivas 1975: 41) an admission of their intrinsic inability to match up to the kshatriyas as much as it is a consequence of the Patidars' de-valuation of the kshatriya lifestyle and their concomitant overvaluation of the Bania one.

CASTE AND POLITICS

If castes are discrete classes (or categories) and if hierarchy is never universally acknowledged then alternative hierarchical rankings are not only believed in introvertedly but can also be asserted by political power. This does not happen only where castes are fluid, or in remote regions (Dumont 1970: 214), but in point of fact it happens all over and not only in remote Hindustan.[...]

Significantly, in keeping with our understanding of castes as discrete categories, intra-caste matters are solved primarily at the level of the caste panchayat. The village panchayat, except in the hill regions, did not exist in pre-modern India, a fact that Dumont observes but fails to draw proper conclusions from.

In modern politics too, the principle of encompassment as detailed by Dumont is conspicuously absent. The principle of discrete castes is, however, upheld in a variety of situations. In Bihar, for instance, there has been no pattern at all when castes have aligned politically. In caste atrocities in Bishrampur, the main issue was sharecroppers' right over cultivated land; the kurmis were the main attackers. But the kurmis were aided by a variety of upper-caste landlords to attack not only the Harijans, but also the Yadavs who are closer to them and traditionally considered to be of the same rank. But in Belchi their attack was on brahmans, the kingpin of the true hierarchy (Dhar et al. 1982: 110). In Gujarat, the Bareyas and Kolis who are of the same rank often unite with the Rajputs to oppose one of their own kind, the newly ascendant Patidar caste (Shah 1982: 139). In Marathwada, the Mahars were attacked by the powerful castes, but the Mangs, who are traditionally supposed to be lower than the mahars, were left untouched. Neither did the mangs stand by the mahars as per the principle of encompassment (Gupta 1979: 12).

Rather than encompassment what one finds is deliberate and conscious linking between different jatis depending upon the exigencies of the situation. The so-called caste associations, like the Kshatriya Sabha or the Kayastha Samaj, also have members belonging to a variety of jatis, who independently decide, uninfluenced by the principle of encompassment, to participate in one organisation or another. This is not only true of the so-called upper-caste organisations, but, as Bose found, is also true of the Teli (oil-pressers) association. Many members of this

association in Orissa had nothing to do with oil-pressing in Orissa or elsewhere (Bose 1960: 79).

It is true that '[t]o adopt a value is to introduce hierarchy ...' (Dumont 1972: 54), but it should also be noted that hierarchy is a consequence of adopting a value, and can therefore on occasions be shamefaced without disowning the symbols of separation. The Dhanuksi, the kurmis, and the Avadhis independently and internally position each other differently on a hierarchical scale, and yet they came together, in 1932, from Oudh to Bihar to form the Kurmi Association. Likewise, in the peasant movement in Oudh (1919-22) where peasants from various caste groups came together, caste separation was strictly maintained without any overt antagonism or signification of inequality among them. The Ahirs fed the Ahirs, the kurmis fed the kurmis, the Pasis fed the Pasis, and yet they all united as equals on the political front, and that too, in the later stages of the movement under the leadership of the low caste Madari Pasi (Siddiqi 1978: 117).

Though hierarchy is consequent to separation, the former can, as we have seen, on occasions be suspended. Castes widely separated by orthodox hierarchisation can unite irrespective of the vaunted principle of encompassment. While hierarchy becomes shamefaced and introverted on these occasions, the discrete character of castes is still upheld. The Telis of Orissa upheld sub-caste endogamy, and thus separation, while welcoming all Teli sub-castes as equals (Bose 1960: 11). As John Harris observed in Tamil Nadu, the village people interpreted the notion of equality as meaning 'the removal of hierarchical distinctions' and did not find the principle of egalitarianism incompatible with the persistence of a strong caste identity so long as separation remained important (Harris 1980: 58). Hierarchical notions in such cases become introverted and are forced to be shamefaced. Equally, as we illustrated with the Belchi and Bishrampur incident, when two caste groups

are politically opposed, then hierarchy becomes strident. The opposed groups see each other as inferior, irrespective of the classical hierarchy. That each group itself is composed of discrete jatis widely separated further violates the orthodox hierarchy. Finally, in keeping with our contention that castes are, first and foremost, discrete entities, any unity between jatis is time-bound and specific. These *same* jatis may on another occasion find themselves in opposition.

CASTE CLASS AND SOCIAL CLASS

[...]In our understanding, class in Marxism refers to the essentially antagonistic classes like the bourgeoisie and the proletariat in the capitalist mode of production. To understand and appreciate the analytical uses of the mode of production and the two classes in opposition is not to claim that the mode of production is all, and that it also informs us of the division of labour in society. Or, to be more specific, the mode of production does not immediately tell us of the exact positioning, distribution and proliferation of social classes in a given society. The caste system on the other hand, in its idealised form refers to the division of labour in society and is thus far from resembling the fundamental classes in Marxism. Moreover, in Marxism the mode of production is an unconscious structure which constrains without prejudice different social classes. The caste ideology is not only a believed-in and conscious structure, but there are almost as many beliefs and ideologies as there are castes in India. Significantly, also a change of occupation does not automatically entail a change of caste. The proud land-owning brahmans remain brahmans, nor do the traditional agrarian castes like the Dhanuks and Dusadhs cease to become so when they change their occupation. The Jatavs remained as Jatavs though they moved upwards economically. The Mahars

remained as Mahars even after many of them refused to do their traditional occupation. This, more than anything else, is the difference between caste and social class. When a worker becomes an accountant, he leaves his former social class and becomes a member of another social class.

Flowing from this we may make another trite conclusion. As castes and occupations do not coincide, so quite naturally there is no identity between the secular states of social classes and the caste identity of members who occupy these social classes. Blunt (1969: 251-52), Ghanshyam Shah (1982: 139), I. P. Desai (1976: 162-63), and Bose (1975: 192-93, 198), among many others, give ample documentation of this phenomenon which is widespread among all castes. In this situation, to believe that caste ideology can be activated for economic or class war is fallacious. Caste ideology essentially separates castes, and consequently also separates social classes over and above the fundamental classes of Marxism. If caste divisions unambiguously overlap with social class distinctions then some benefit might accrue in using the caste ideology. But if caste ideologies separate castes, then the reliance on caste ideology, even the traditionally lower caste ones, will give only limited gains and will be counter-productive in the long run. All castes, high and low, secrete, propound and consolidate ideologies which separate them from their fellow men in other castes. It is nearly embarrassing to mention such an obvious truth but it has become necessary in the face of the many confusions that persist among scholars in this field.

DEFINING CASTE

Looking back at all that we have been through in this essay, we may, at this stage, attempt a definition of caste. History has liquidated many characteristics of the caste system and has offered us, without any conscious phenomenological

effort, 'an imaginative variation of facts'. Hereditary occupational specialisation is no longer active, the principles of purity and pollution do not invariably intervene to hierarchise, the notion of the encompassing and the encompassed can no longer summon the liege men. Only the principle of endogamy remains to ensure biological separation between different jatis. But as the biological separation can fall on no significant biological characteristics, jatis are forced to hypersymbolise their discrete character through a multiplicity of rituals.

The caste system is a form of differentiation. It cannot be subsumed under a system of *fundamentum divisionis*. That is why caste cannot be seen as an extreme form of class, race or estates; and Dumont is correct on this score. And yet it is not within us to come up with an analytical definition of caste; the best we can do is to offer a definition that is traditionally known as *definition per genus et differentiam*.

We would define the caste system as a form of differentiation wherein the constituent units of the system justify endogamy on the basis of putative biological differences which are semaphored by the ritualisation of multiple social practices. The above definition, according to us, gives the essence of the caste system.

The phrase, 'ritualisation of multiple social practices', however, needs further explication. By rituals we mean all those social practices that are followed because they are supposed to be inherently good irrespective of Weber's 'means-ends' rationality. For instance, to follow an occupation, and pursue it in a certain mode, regardless of means-ends rationality would also be considered by us to be a form of ritual activity. It is for this reason that we have not considered hereditary occupations per se to be an essential aspect of the caste system for it would have led to some misunderstanding. In any case, hereditary occupational specialisation is not universal within the caste

system, as has been argued earlier, nor is it a peculiarity of the caste system alone.

The caste system also exhibits two characteristics which cannot be seen as its essence but may be understood as its *properties*. The two properties of the caste system are *hierarchy* and *hypersymbolism*.

(a) Hierarchy: The discrete character of jatis is maintained by the enhanced valuation that members of jati place on their own customs, ritualised practice's, and genealogical heritage. This should, and does, imply a value-loaded scale which places different jatis at different positions in the hierarchy. But this hierarchical placement by virtue of being value-loaded is extremely idiosyncratic, and different hierarchies exist at the subjective level. These are perhaps, as we have said earlier, as many hierarchies as there are jatis. But very often in practice we find one hierarchical order more in effect. This particular hierarchical order is, however, not the essence of the caste system, nor the inevitable consequence of it, but an expression of political or politico-economic power. Logically, an alternative hierarchy can also effectively come into practice with a change in the political and economic strength of certain castes—a reshuffling, i.e. of jatis on the secular plane.

(b) Hypersymbolism: Our definition tells us that the discrete character of jatis is maintained through a multiplicity of ritualised practices. These rituals are not to be lightly taken as they indicate to us the substantive and emotive content of jatis. The number of rituals and beliefs, and the plethora of diacritical marks that particularise individual jatis do not follow any single rule. Neither are they restricted to the number necessary to differentiate

one jati from another. Many of these rituals and beliefs are historical accretions and effects of past associations and contingent conditions. Members of a jati do not only value what separates them from other jatis. They also value those symbols and beliefs that are fairly widespread and held in common by a number of castes, leading to what we have called *hypersymbolism*.

The multiplicity of rituals in the caste system does not convey fresh information with every instance. Hypersymbolism, and the consequent redundancy of rituals on the other hand heighten values characteristic of the caste system to invoke a passionate sense of belonging to one's caste. Contemporary semiology can legitimately stake its claim to clarify this domain. According to the semiologist Pierre Guirand, 'The greater the redundancy, the more the communication is significant, closed, socialised and codified; the lower the redundancy, the greater the information and the more open, individualised and decodified the communication' (Guirand 1975: 13).

Where would we place the question of purity and pollution? As we had recorded earlier (Gupta 1981), historical evidence tells us that untouchability is a later addition in the history of the Indian caste system. Till about the second century AD, certain castes, like the Ayogava, Paulkasas, and the Nishadas, were despised, but were not considered to be untouchables. Untouchability is, therefore, a historical cohort of the caste system, and not its essence. The notion of purity and pollution, as Dumont correctly observed, is integrally linked with the institution of untouchability. But like untouchability, the notion of purity and pollution is also an historical accretion. Over time, this notion freed itself from its specific and original task of separating untouchables from the others and began to be operative at different planes of the caste system, thus

providing additional gusto to the property of hypersymbolism. But it is in keeping with its character of being an historical accretion that the notion of purity and pollution does not subsume hypersymbolism: for, as we have been at considerable pains to point out earlier, purity and pollution are not universally employed to effect the diacritical marks separating different jatis.

CONCLUSION

[...]In insisting upon the diverse characteristics between continuous hierarchies and discrete classes apropos of the caste system we believe we have been able to accommodate facts without evasions and embarrassment. It is no longer necessary to surreptitiously bring in politics and economics, as Dumont does, as neither politics nor economics militate against the existence of a system composed of discrete categories. For if one were to conceptualise jatis as discrete entities, and see their differences as one of quality rather than degree, then this would 'account for the facility with which castes who occupy a very low position in the *Varna* hierarchy, like the Shudras, find it possible to subsume political power ...' (ibid.: 69).

Neither do jatis as discrete categories exist in isolation. A jati is able to sustain itself only in the presence of other jatis in a clearly de-limited referential context which gives meaning to symbols, and indeed to hypersymbolism as well. A discrete caste lives in a world of discrete castes, and cannot exist where *only* social classes thrive. Castes do not form a system because they submit to the 'whole'—the true hierarchy (Dumont 1972: 78)—but because they separate themselves only with reference to each other.

The relative freedom that each jati intrinsically possesses as a discrete entity, allows its members to independently add, alter, or even drop rituals and beliefs if it helps them

in their secular and economic spheres. This is not only logically possible, but has also been recorded by several studies, some of which were used in the preceding pages. The fact that even those who participate in the caste system are capable of reflection and action and not merely reflexive action is something that not many of us are quite used to, in spite of the growing evidence from many empirical studies by fellow anthropologists. Clearly a fresh conceptual effort is long overdue if one is to appreciate the vivacity and dynamism of castes in India. Such an exercise would also be in accordance with the fundamental lesson on anthropology that there exists between men across different cultures with divergent systems of differentiation a fundamental unity—a unity which all orthodoxies and textual traditions have consistently striven to deny.

THE PECULIAR TENACITY OF CASTE*

ANDRÉ BÉTEILLE

Perceptions about the nature and significance of caste have changed in the last 60 years. When M. N. Srinivas drew attention in 1957 to the continuing hold of caste, *Times of India* commented editorially that he was 'exaggerating the role of caste in Indian public life and politics' (Srinivas 1962: 2). That would have been the general response of most English language newspapers at least outside peninsular India. Today, on the other hand, television channels vie with each other in bringing to light the importance of the 'caste factor' in social and political life.[...]

RECOGNITION OF CASTE

Srinivas had thrown a stone into the placid waters of anthropology and that stone was to create ripples in the course of time. Srinivas' argument began to find favour with anthropologists engaged in the study of India, starting with those who came from overseas. Indian anthropologists gradually turned their attention from tribal studies to village studies. Intensive fieldwork in the Indian village led them to recognise the continuing presence of caste. These new field studies turned the attention of Indian anthropologists from varna to jati and to the active and dynamic relations between caste and politics. Political scientists like Rajni Kothari began to take a closer look at the part played by caste in the operation of politics at the local and the regional levels (Kothari 1975). Some political scientists went so far as to suggest that the effective operation of democracy in India required the use of caste in

the political process for, in their view, caste brought democracy to the doorsteps of the ordinary Indian (Kothari 1975; Rudolph and Rudolph 1967).

The pre-occupation with caste received a boost with the arrival in the country shortly after Independence of a large number of anthropologists from overseas, particularly the US, to undertake studies of society and politics in India. They focused on the study of caste for obvious reasons. First, caste was undoubtedly both an important and a conspicuous feature of Indian society. But to anthropologists from overseas, it had the added attraction of novelty. Had they wished to study class, they could have done so in their own society. While focusing on caste on account of its peculiarity, they were also inclined to exaggerate its tenacity. Anthropologists working in distant places tend to yield to the temptation of what the Swedish author Stefan Molund (1991: 43) has called 'the maximisation of differences'.

Not everyone was prepared to concede as much to caste at that time. The economists, who dominated the social science profession till the mid-1970s, took a very different view of the matter. They were convinced that caste belonged to India's past and not its future. Their main focus of attention was the economic development of India, and they were convinced that caste was an obstacle to economic development and, moreover, an obstacle which could be removed through the formulation and application of intelligent policy. They believed that the attention given to caste by the anthropologists and sociologists contributed neither to better understanding nor to better policy. They certainly did not believe that caste had anything to contribute to the advance of democracy.[...]

The educated Indians among whom I moved in Calcutta and Delhi made their judgements about caste on the basis of their own experiences and aspirations rather than on any systematic field investigation or any careful study of the

ethnographic literature. Not many of them were sociologists of whom there were only a few at that time. Change was in the air, and they were naturally more inclined to pick out such evidence as indicated that the old order was being replaced by a new one. It is true that they did not sift all the available evidence carefully and systematically, but it would be wrong to say that there was no evidence at all for the judgements they made. If one looked carefully and dispassionately, one would find a great deal of evidence for change.

THREE AREAS

There were three major areas of social life in which the evidence suggested that caste was declining and not advancing. First, the observance of the rules relating to purity and pollution were becoming weaker. Second, the regulation of marriage according to the rules of caste, was becoming less stringent. And third, the relation between caste and occupation was becoming more flexible. If one kept one's eyes on these three aspects of caste, one would have reason to believe that caste was on the whole becoming weaker.[...]

I will begin by considering the rules of purity and pollution. To the majority of Indians who were moving into the new economic order based on the office and the factory, the decline in the force of ritual seemed not only obvious but also inevitable. Many of them had witnessed the operation of those rules in their homes, among their parents and elders. Some continued to observe them out of inertia while others derided their excesses openly. The inertia of custom has ensured the survival of many old ritual practices, particularly on ceremonial occasions, but they no longer permeate everyday life to the extent they did in the past.

The attenuation of ritual observances in everyday life has been attributed to what has been broadly described as 'secularisation'. After describing the various factors contributing to secularisation, Srinivas observed, '... the concepts of pollution and purity which are central as well as pervasive in Hinduism were greatly weakened as a result of the operation of a variety of factors already mentioned' (Srinivas 1995: 126). While drawing attention to the course of secularisation, he was careful to point out that it might be accompanied by a strengthening and not weakening of what he called Sanskritisation. Sanskritisation enlarged the scope of ritual in ceremonial life even while the force of purity and pollution was being reduced in everyday life, in the school, the office and the marketplace.

RULES OF COMMENSALITY

The ethnography of the pre-Independence period is replete with discussions of the rules of purity and pollution and their use in maintaining social distance between castes. Most conspicuous among these rules were the rules of commensality.

J. H. Hutton (1961: 71) wrote, 'Now the taboo on food and water as between caste and caste is subject to many gradations and variations. It is often stated that the test of a 'clean caste', that is to say, a caste of respectable and non-polluting status, lies in whether or not a Brahman can accept drinking water at its hands.' In Bengal, the distinction between castes from which water was acceptable and those from which it was not provided a rough-and-ready marker of the hierarchy of caste. But there were great regional variations in the lengths to which those distinctions were carried. In the Tanjore district of Tamil Nadu, orthodox Shri Vaishnava Brahmins did not

accept water from the hands of their Smartha counterparts as recently as 40 or 50 years ago.

Not all the rules of commensality had a direct bearing on the relations between castes, but many of them did. The use of food transactions as a basis for the social ranking of castes was examined in some detail by the American anthropologist McKim Marriott (1968). His evidence was somewhat mixed, and it did not lead to any clear conclusion. He favoured an 'interactional' as against an 'attributional' approach to caste ranking based on observations of the actual interaction between members of different castes. His observations seemed to indicate that food transactions had become more flexible.

Srinivas was no doubt right in pointing out that in modern India secularisation and Sanskritisation were advancing together. Sanskritisation enlarged the scope of ritual, particularly on ceremonial occasions which began to be organised on a larger scale than before and with enormous expenditure. But the scope of ritual might increase on ceremonial occasions while at the same time declining on everyday occasions. The huge expenditure on ritual in the public sphere might in fact be a compensation for its attenuation in domestic life.

Even where ritual observances are given a new lease of life by the enlargement of ceremonial, the rules of ritual do not perform the same function as before. Their role in maintaining and reinforcing social exclusion has been weakened. The link between caste and ritual has weakened precisely in matters relating to commensality. When food is served on festive occasions, members of different castes are no longer served food according to the rules of caste. To require people to sit for a meal according to their caste on a public occasion would cause a scandal today.

When I say that social exclusion based on the ritual attributes of caste is in decline, I do not mean that all forms of discrimination and exclusion have disappeared or are

about to disappear. Distinctions of status are observed in every society and old rules of exclusion are often replaced by more subtle and flexible codes whose social effects are similar.

Nowhere in the world do people freely inter-dine with each other without any consideration of rank or status. The criteria of rank and status are changing in ways which affect commensal practices as well as the operation of caste. The old ritual criteria have not disappeared, but they have to compete increasingly with new secular criteria. Salient among the latter are education and occupation. Wealth always mattered, but education and occupation have gained ground increasingly as markers of status in contemporary India and they determine to some extent who eats with whom on social occasions.

The compulsions of secular education and professional employment make inter-dining among members of different castes almost inevitable. In the college canteen or the office lunch room, segregation according to caste is now almost impossible. No matter what one's private sentiments may be, to insist on segregation at meals in such a context would invite ridicule today although it might have seemed the most obvious thing to do a 100 years ago. Yet, separation, if not segregation during meals has not ceased to exist. An officer will not sit and eat with his peon even if the two are of the same caste whereas he might eat in the company of another officer of similar rank but of a different caste.

Higher education and professional employment have not done all that the proponents of development and modernisation expected them to do. Perhaps they were too sanguine in their expectations. Old practices, habits and attitudes have shown greater resilience than was expected. India is a very large country where few things disappear altogether. But it will be a travesty to argue that nothing changes in India.

The winds of change have not left even rural India untouched. Ethnographic studies of villages from all parts of the country indicate a general relaxation of the restrictions on inter-dining. One of the best among these is the study of a village in central India by Adrian C. Mayer which he kept under observation through repeated visits between 1954 and 1992. Mayer noted that while the old rules of commensality still remained, their observance by men as well as women had become more relaxed. He assigned some significance to increased travel outside the village and to the emergence of eating places along the roadside outside the village (Mayer 1996).

Mayer found that there was both continuity and change, and explained why it was so difficult to strike an exact balance between the two. But even though there might be disagreement over the pace and extent of change, few would disagree about its general direction. No ethnographer to my knowledge has argued that the ritual rules governing inter-caste relations are becoming more stringent whether in the cities or in the villages.

Not all those who wrote about caste in the period before Independence assigned primacy to its ritual basis. H. H. Risley (1915) who had preceded Hutton as the commissioner of census, would give primacy to the rules for the regulation of marriage. There is, in any case, a close relationship between inter-dining and intermarriage within the caste system. It is undeniable that there is something distinctive if not unique about the rules of marriage whose importance has been underlined in the classical texts as well as the modern ethnographic literature (Dumont 1983). [...]

RULE OF ENDOGAMY

The rule of marriage that is linked most directly and obviously to the perpetuation of caste is the rule of

endogamy. It is that rule which confines the ties of kinship and marriage within a small and defined group and thereby enables it to maintain clear social boundaries with other groups of the same kind. If the boundaries between social classes are more vague and fluid than those between castes, it is largely because marriage rules in societies divided by class are less well-defined and more flexible than those in societies based on caste. In the kind of local communities in which the majority of the population lived in the past, marriage within the caste or the sub-caste was as much the responsibility of the local kin group as of the parties directly concerned. With the increased movement of population, local groups have become more dispersed and less close-knit.

In the past, the weight of local opinion ensured that the marriage partners were properly matched not only according to caste but also according to subcaste or even sub-subcaste. A marriage between a Smartha and a Shri Vaishnava Brahmin, or between a Rarhi and a Barendra Brahmin would be viewed as an inter-caste marriage. That might no longer be the perception today. Redefining the boundaries of caste expands the range of choices available even in arranged marriages and it helps to accommodate factors other than caste in the choice of marriage partners. [...]

Traditional marriage practices were based on the joint operation of the hierarchy of castes and the subordination of women. Among the upper castes in particular, girls were married very young, ideally before they attained puberty. There was hardly any scope for the exercise of choice by the girl being offered in marriage. This is changing, though not very rapidly or to the same extent in all sections of society. There is now greater scope for individual choice although how far that choice is actually exercised in order to marry in a different caste is difficult to determine.

Significant changes are taking place in the position of women in Indian society. They are now joining the ranks of the middle class in their own right, as doctors, lawyers, professors, bankers, and consultants, and not just as daughters or wives of members of that class. As young adults, they are better able to exercise or at least indicate their marriage preferences than adolescents or children which is what most brides were when they were married off in the past. It does not follow from this that many women do in fact exercise their choice in favour of marriage outside the caste. At the same time, the marriage of adults, no matter how compliant, is more difficult to regulate according to the rules of caste than child marriage.[...]

CASTE AND OCCUPATION

(...) For centuries in the past, caste had provided the social basis for the division of labour in an economy of land and grain. There were two distinctive, if not unique, features of the traditional division of labour. The first was the extreme specialisation of crafts and services that grew within it; and the second was the close association between each specialised occupation and a designated community in which membership was by birth.(...)

This extreme specialisation and the transmission of techniques from generation to generation within an extended kin group had its own advantages. But what was an advantage when technology changed very slowly, if at all, became a disadvantage under conditions of rapid technological change. British rule created the conditions for such change, and the inevitable outcome was the loosening of the association between caste and occupation. The pace of technological change increased after Independence, and Nehru's vision of advancing through technological innovation prevailed over Gandhi's vision of a

nation based on the village community sustained by its traditional crafts.

However, the association between caste and occupation only loosened; it did not break down altogether. Even in the past it was not as rigid as some were led to believe. No handicraft could sustain the entire population of the caste which was associated with it, particularly when the population was rising and where opportunities for migration were limited. The surplus population from a particular caste or sub-caste could always move into agriculture or some other gainful activity not associated with any particular caste. What was not easy was the movement from one to another specialised craft or service already assigned to an existing caste or sub-caste.

Apart from the decline of traditional crafts and services, a significant development was the emergence of a new kind of occupational system based in the office and the factory. As I have already indicated, the new occupational system introduced its own social gradations which began to cut across the gradations of caste. This development started in the second half of the nineteenth century, and it began to gain ground after Independence, and especially after the economic reforms of the 1990s. In the early decades of Independence, it was the public sector that took the lead in it, but now the private sector has become the driving force behind technological innovation and change.

These developments are creating a churning process in which old occupations based on caste are being displaced by new 'caste-free' occupations. Where the choice of occupation is strictly regulated by caste, the scope for individual mobility is restricted. Everywhere in the world the middle class is animated by the desire for individual mobility. The inability of individuals to move freely across the occupational space acts as a drag on economic development. The growing pressure for individual mobility

is bound to weaken the association between caste and occupation.[...]

It is in any case not my argument that the association between caste and occupation has disappeared or is about to disappear. That association is there for everyone to see. My argument is simply that it has not become stronger. The evidence shows that the association has become increasingly more complex and in that process has, if anything, grown a little weaker. The disproportionate attention paid to caste has diverted attention away from other major sources of inequality and conflict, most notably those of class.

* * * * *

I have in the preceding sections examined evidence to determine if caste has been getting stronger since Independence. The evidence I have brought to light indicates that caste is in fact losing its strength, though not uniformly or dramatically. At the same time, it will be rash to conclude that all those from M. N. Srinivas onwards who have argued for the continuing if not increasing strength of caste have been deluded. We will have to turn to a different sphere of activity to understand the peculiar tenacity of caste, and that is the sphere of politics. Caste had entered the political arena before the Independence of India. The British had encouraged the use of caste and community in the formation of political groups as a way of keeping the movement for national unity under control. They found it more convenient to deal with such groups than with a political party such as the Indian National Congress. The non-Brahmin movement of peninsular India became a kind of counterpart to the assertion of political identity among religious minorities in the north. The leaders of the Congress Party who made their case against the British on the platform of national unity sought to play down these

movements and hoped that they would lose their momentum once national Independence had been secured. Strange as it may sound today, many of the leaders of the nationalist movement believed that democracy would put an end to caste. It is this belief that Srinivas attacked as being unfounded and naïve.[...]

As the focus of attention shifted from matters of esteem and prestige to matters of political advantage, or from status to power, several consequences followed. Rivalries between castes became more open; the sense of deprivation became more widespread among socially disadvantaged castes; and the colonial government began to be approached for redressing the balance in favour of the disadvantaged. The lower castes did not expect fair treatment at the hands of the upper, and felt that only the British could give them what they most needed. The upper castes whose members dominated the Congress Party naturally felt resentful. Resentment between the upper and the lower castes became built into the politics of backwardness.

After Independence, the political conflicts among castes became more widespread and more intense. New rivalries and new alliances between castes, sub-castes and groups of castes began to arise. There were enormous regional differences at the time of Independence, the most notable being the difference ... between peninsular India and the rest of the country. These differences have become ironed out to some extent as a result of the greater involvement of caste in the political process in most if not all parts of the country.[...]

The adoption of adult franchise after Independence altered the scope of caste politics and created new openings for its operation. Going to the colonial authorities for redressing the imbalances between castes is one thing, and going to the people for that purpose is another. The colonial authorities acted with caution and moderation, and

they were inclined to treat the demands made by castes and communities as matters of policy rather than of right. With the adoption of adult franchise, the countryside began to experience the pulls and pressures, and also the thrills of electioneering on an unprecedented scale. Loyalty to caste provided an easy basis for mobilising electoral support. Where caste consciousness was dying down, it was brought back to life by the massive campaigns that became a part of every election.

Once again, the difference between peninsular India and the rest of the country stands out. In the old Madras Presidency and in the old Mysore state, the non-brahmin movement had kept caste in the public consciousness ever since the formation of the Justice Party. After Independence, it did not take much effort there to adapt the consciousness of caste, lying just beneath the surface, to the new kind of electoral politics. In the north, in states such as Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, it took a little more time to reach the same outcome.

At first the use of caste for mobilising electoral support was defended on pragmatic grounds. Now it has come to be defended on grounds of social justice. The reason given by each political party in the early years of Independence was that in a world where every political party was using caste, it would be imprudent to risk the loss of electoral support by ignoring caste. The Left parties and their intellectual advocates were particularly censorious about fostering caste sentiments through the electoral process. Their attitude to caste politics then was radically different from their attitude to class politics.

WATERSHED OF 1975-77 EMERGENCY

Things began to change in the aftermath of the Emergency of 1975-77. The report of the Mandal Commission of 1980 and the agitation for the implementation of its

recommendations in 1990 turned the tide in favour of caste politics. Increasingly, social justice came to be seen as a matter of caste rather than class. The Left parties acquiesced in this change of orientation and even sought to justify it in the name of Marxism; the author of the three volumes of *Das Kapital* must have turned in his grave.

In a democracy, political programmes that are advocated on ideological grounds often have purely pragmatic grounds for their adoption. What are the pragmatic considerations that favour caste over class as a basis for mobilising electoral support? To put it in a nutshell, the identities of caste are much more clear-cut and fixed than those of class. Everybody, or almost everybody can say what his caste is, and he will give the same answer from one election to the next. Very few can tell what their class is, and the answer could change over time.

The founders of the theory of class and class conflict believed in the nineteenth century that the principal classes in capitalist society would come to be defined more and more clearly and sharply and that each class would become progressively more aware of its own identity and its own material interests. That did not happen in the advanced industrial societies, and is not likely to happen either there or in India. Increased opportunities for individual mobility have weakened the identities of class but have done little to affect the identities of caste....

The consciousness of caste is heightened periodically by campaigns for electoral office which have become more spectacular, more extravagant and more costly from one campaign to another. In the intervals between elections, the same consciousness is kept alive by the interest displayed by the media in caste and its role in public life. In most parts of the country outside peninsular India caste was largely ignored by the media. I do not remember much interest being shown in caste by the newspapers in Calcutta or Delhi until 1977....

There has been a sea-change in the approach of the media to caste matters. Newspapers in India's capital city now give much more space to caste than they did before.... However, the main responsibility for giving a sensational turn to caste lies with the electronic media. Private television channels organise discussions for which they secure the assistance of experts of various kinds who speak endlessly and tirelessly about the 'caste factor' or the 'caste equation' at work behind every kind of electoral alliance and rivalry. They have found this to be an easy and effective way of maintaining viewer interest. In this process the long-term changes in other aspects of caste get easily lost to sight. The social and political scientists who are lured by these television channels come to believe in their own formulas, and propagate them through scholarly and semi-scholarly publications. It has now become a part of the conventional wisdom that caste is here to stay just as it was a part of the conventional wisdom among the makers of modern India that caste was bound to disappear.

RISE OF THE DALITS AND THE RENEWED DEBATE ON CASTE*

RAJNI KOTHARI

We are in the middle of a new debate on the age-old issue of caste in a radically changed historical setting both at home and globally. It is a setting of growing human inequity and widening social chasms within and across nations. But, more pertinently, it has been gradually dawning on us that the various ideological models of dealing with oppression of the poor and discriminated sections of society, protecting their freedom and dignity and their sheer survival as human beings and communities, have proved not just inadequate but by and large irrelevant. Meanwhile, the new thinking on economic development is going to exacerbate the situation.

Acts of brutality and terror continue to be part of the atrocities perpetuated on the Dalits and other lower classes, the more so the more they become conscious of their rights and begin to assert themselves. Entire communities are found to be in deep turmoil, face constant humiliation and growing erosion of their identity and sense of being part of civil society, the nation and the state. Ever so often we hear ghastly tales of these atrocities taking place in one or another part of the country....

The long-held assumption that as the project of nation-building gets under way and democratic rights are extended to the people, that as the development process also gets under way and more and more people and communities benefit from it all and the sources of poverty, unemployment and human misery are eliminated, and that

as the productive forces get unfolded and the dialectic of history gets working, there will be no need for 'parochial' structures of caste, community, tribe and various feudal vestiges and that people will enter into new relationships of a more secular and political kind. These assumptions have since been belied. As we think backwards and examine our record on the promises that were held out by the system and the dominant ideology of 'development' to the poor and the oppressed peoples, in which incidentally the people themselves had reposed a lot of faith, we are struck by our incapacity and our growing powerlessness before the vested interests that have acted in concert to take the system in completely different directions. It seems to me that there are two main reasons for this. First, the very agenda of democratic nation-building and social transformation has not been carried through. And, second, we are finding that Indian reality is proving too complex and ridden with deep divisions and paradoxes which are proving un-amenable to traditional analysis and ideological interpretations. Over time, after showing a lot of patience and forbearance, people are losing faith and are coming to the conclusion that they might have to fend for themselves. This is not to be regretted for the essence of the democratic process is that people come into their own and not wail endlessly for the state or the political parties to make things better for them.

It is against this background that the newly exploding caste identity and consciousness needs to be viewed. For long, consciousness of caste was the preserve of the brahminic upper castes. Today, something quite different is happening: the very sufferers from the system (including the caste system) are invoking caste identity and claims. Precisely those who should seek obliteration of the divisions and disparities that characterise the deeply hierarchical nature of the caste system are found to use it the most, still hoping to undermine it by undertaking basic

transformation in the social order, defeating the forces of communalism and fascism, and do precisely what the larger secular order has failed to provide: a society free of exploitation and oppression and indignities. No doubt, the more such assertion takes place, the more the backlash from the upper castes and the well-to-do who find this rise of the masses intolerable and something they have never been used to and the more the efforts to divide, confuse and co-opt the forces of change. As there is no clear and well-thought-out ideological framework that is relevant to undertaking these new struggles, the processes of co-optation and buying up, of divide and rule, by the dominant class or party continues. We are nowhere near the end or even the glimpses of an end to inequity and exploitation. But it appears from a variety of indications that the process has started and there is need to provide fresh impetus and intellectual understanding backed by political action based on new models of coalition-making that cut across the wide array of deprived and oppressed social strata.[...]

CASTE AND STRUGGLE AGAINST OPPRESSION

In this upsurge, the struggle for social justice is found to move beyond the logic of class or of socialism and thus also constitutes a major challenge to both the politics of the Left and the politics of what are known as the 'new social movements' alongside being a challenge to the Nehruvian perspective that has guided the post-Independence elite's thinking on social change, economic development, modernisation, secularism, modern education and electoral democracy, all of which were supposed to move the country towards a progressive, non-hierarchical, non-segmental, 'open society'. It is a challenge that is beginning to put on the defensive a large cross-section of individuals and institutions that were hitherto engaged in the task of 'nation-building' and the building of a 'secular' society. For

most of them, caste continues to be an anachronism. That caste and caste identity can, under certain circumstances, prove to be secular for the political process and are able to counter communal parties and ideologies is unacceptable to most of them. When I had argued such a case following the adoption of the Mandal Commission Report by the National Front government, leading sociologists of the country had expressed strong disagreement with me.¹ I continue to hold that position. For me caste can be oppressive but it can also provide a basis for struggle against oppression. It can at once be a traditionaliser and a moderniser. It has the potential of being a two-pronged catalyst: as purveyor of collective identity and an annihilator of the same hierarchical order from which the collective identity is drawn. Furthermore, certain types of caste mobilisation are also pitched against communalism of the religious sectarian type, hence my characterisation of it as a 'secular upsurge' against which the eminent sociologists had expressed their disagreement.

It all depends on the activation and deepening (as against stagnation and flattening or regression) of the democratic process. It was argued very early by M. N. Srinivas and others that with the coming of democracy caste got a new lease of life. This is being said now with much greater vehemence. The point is that caste does resurface as a result of the democratic process but in its resurfacing it gets transformed. Indeed, one can argue that 'casteism in politics' is an agenda for the very transformation of the caste system. I had developed this view at some length in an earlier work, published as far back as 1970 (Kothari 1970), where I had argued that 'casteism in politics is no more and no less than politicisation of caste' which, in turn, leads to a transformation of the caste system. This happened both structurally and ideologically. Within the social structure of

caste a whole variety of new alignments took place which undermined the rigidity of the system—both the splitting and the federating of caste, along secular political lines, enabling them to bargain with political parties and adopt organisational forms in keeping with the demands of the latter (Kothari and Maru 1965; Rudolph and Rudolph 1967). Ideologically there took place a basic shift from hierarchy to plurality, from ordained status to negotiated positions of power, from ritual definitions of roles and positions to civic and political definitions of the same.

Of course, as already hinted, in the post-Independence period various efforts have been made to reduce the potency of caste in the social process and in time eliminate it from the operation of the same. These efforts have not succeeded. Part of this effort is based on the idea that as secularism will undermine communal and religious identities it will undermine caste identities as well or, as held by some others, as class consciousness grows, caste consciousness will decline. Or that with 'equality' of access and opportunity people will be drawn out of their caste and creed and other traditional identities into the modern sector, that modern education will make them part of a single and homogeneous middle class and that a new conception of unity based [on national identity](#) will emerge. As this happens both communalism based on religious assertions and casteism based on traditional identities of both 'varna' and 'jati' type will simultaneously go under.

This pairing of 'caste' and 'communalism' has been most misleading and tends to confuse the persistence of plural identities with attempted polarisation. The term 'communal identity' can itself take two wholly opposite forms—identity giving and identity eroding, subjugating and eradicating—just as 'community' can have distinct meanings. It can be used in the macro all-encompassing form of polarising communities or in micro pluralising form as has all along been the case on the ground in rural India (the former

meaning has acquired some sway only of late). With the entry of the democratic political process the pluralistic micro perspective took precedence over the polarising macro attempt that was carried over by some from pre-partition days and in the meanwhile the diverse micro processes added up to a new macro structure of society-politics interaction—until the old macro view reverberated with a bang after the challenge thrown to it by the Mandal phenomenon (Kothari 1992).

More recently, the polarising thrust has received a setback following the state elections in 1993 and there seems to be a sigh of relief among secular parties and intellectuals; it seems that the Indian polity has an inherent capacity to contain extremities and polar positions when these are overstretched, a sort of refusal to get into a dark alley or an abyss of total destruction. But whether the forces of Hindutva have been rolled back for good is by no means clear. Nor is there any clue as to what will take its place. It should also be remembered that it was not the parties or the intellectuals who rolled it back but rather a large upsurge of both consciousness and political assertion on the part of the Dalit masses on the one hand and the Muslim middle-level leadership in Uttar Pradesh on the other. It is also not clear as to who will be the net beneficiary. Will it not be the same old story of others doing the mobilisation—dissident movements, grassroots organisations and a section of the opposition—and the old status quo Congress Party getting the benefit of it all, putting both the major adversary (in this case the Bharatiya Janata Party [BJP]) and the new social forces (in this case the Dalit and other lower castes) on the margins. Already, the new government in Uttar Pradesh is dependent on the Congress for its survival in office.

This process is still under way and has of late received new social inputs. It is a highly complex and turbulent process. While there is no doubt that both communalism

and the caste system pose dangers to the democratic polity, they are quite distinct from each other and in the case of caste, can be used in support of secularising and democratising movements. The two can of course combine; the worst of communalism and the worst of caste oppression can converge, the former undermining plurality and diversity and the basic democratic vision of the society, while the latter providing new leases of life to the brahminic social order the essence of which is contempt for the labouring classes and for labour as such, especially for the most arduous and demeaning kinds, the ultimate logic of which has been the phenomenon of untouchability (arising out of the basic dichotomy between the Brahmin, the dispenser of knowledge, and the Shudra, the bearer of all variety of physical labour). There are also inherent limits to the pluralism represented by the caste system. Pluralism can be as exploitative as other—regarding and ameliorative. Plurality can be hierarchised, instilled with animus, brutalised. When this is combined with economic deprivation and traditional attitudes of social pollution, it can reinforce the impacts of corporate capitalism and bureaucratic hegemonism, and produce a world in which millions are excluded, and made dispensable (Kothari 1988). In the process, the Dalits and other seemingly upward mobile castes can be marginalised. Alongside proletarianisation and general pauperisation can also take place *dalitisation* of the entire social terrain below the privileged upper castes.

Which way the phenomenon of caste will take Indian society it may be too early to say. Much will depend on the vitality as against erosion of the democratic process, of the ability of the intellectuals to impart social content to the development process and the extent to which the growing convergence between the forces of privatisation and globalisation and the theology of a religious monolith represented by *Hindutva* can be contained. But whichever

way it goes, there is no gainsaying the importance of caste in the social process in the coming decades.

IMPORTANCE OF CASTE IN THE SOCIAL PROCESS

This is important to grasp as on the one hand almost the entire spectrum of secular striving, from the liberal to the radical, has ruled out caste and caste identity as part of the transformative process, while on the other hand there is emerging a new caste consciousness (sometimes dubbed as caste-class) which is finding the traditional secular approach to social transformation as wanting and in effect leaving the truly deprived and destitute social strata, the Dalits in particular but other backward castes (OBCs) too, out of the purview of state power, and arguing for a new form of radicalism based on the assertion and the claims of these castes. The secular forces have been expressed in three streams: the liberal democratic state operating through the institutions of parliamentary democracy and the legal framework of the Constitution which laid down people's rights and the principles of equality and non-discrimination on grounds of caste or creed but provided no institutional mechanisms for realising the same, also no clear social—as opposed to formally legal and political—prescriptions; the social movements (often called the new social movements) that arose to demand fulfilment of these rights but also failed being too fragmented and lacking in real transformative quality, and the traditional Left (both parties and intellectuals, of both Marxist and Leninist-Maoist variety) which also lacked a clear *social* agenda beyond the traditional highly simplistic bourgeois-petty bourgeois-kulak-proletariat depiction of a highly complex indigenous reality and failed to give to the Dalits, the backwards and other oppressed social strata a position in their own organisational structures. I have said enough on

the mainstream liberal democratic system's failures above and enough is known about it anyway. In what follows, I shall deal with the other two secular efforts—the social movements (often called new social movements) and the ideological Left.

As I see it, nearly all 'new social movements' have emerged as correctives to new maladies—environmental degradation, violation of the status of women, destruction of tribal cultures and the undermining of human rights—none of which are in and by themselves transformative of the social order. They are in that way quite different from revolutionary ideologies of the past. But their basic weakness lies in their being so heavily fragmented. In this they are not any different from earlier attempts at social change or from the nature of party politics that we have had. Fragmentation that is short of total disintegration has been the hallmark of Indian society. That it is partly based on the very pluralism of Indian society which allows it to 'hold' may be true but that it constantly debilitates the entire social process is equally true. Nations that have split as a result of determined polarisation have had to go through traumas of violence and warfare but have not at the end come out badly, not worse anyway than steady erosion which too entail a lot of violence and a whole series of micro civil wars and secessionist movements. Add to this state of fragmentation a high degree of passivity-cum-quiescence-cum-confirmity on the part of large sections of the people, and the result is a virtual state of sterility and stupor which is, however, riven with deep tension, distress and multiple polarities. A large part of the space occupied by the new social movements seems to be suffering from these various characteristics which have prevented them from being relevant to the truly oppressed and the poor in the form of a solid unified movement of the people. They are too fragmented, reactive, *ad hocish*, providing no comprehensive framework of basic social change. Their

being anti this or that (anti-West, anti-capitalist, anti-development, etc.) does not make them any more coherent, any more relevant to oppressed and peripheralised communities.

NEW 'DALIT' MOVEMENT

It is against this growing irrelevance of various grassroots movements that the new 'Dalit' movement in India is emerging, or seems like emerging. The Dalit consciousness is by no means limited to the SCs. It has begun to symbolise a much broader spectre of the oppressed and hitherto excluded social strata. It is based on an attempted though by no means still realised solidarity of the poor and the discriminated classes of the people, long held back and frustrated, its leadership divided and bought over, distanced from the masses and co-opted within the mainstream and in establishment structures and positions. Were it not for a systematic and continuing onslaught by the rural upper castes and the real and deadly fear of a political kind held out by the emergent brahminic party (the BJP) and its arrogant cultural expression in the form of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) which in turn allowed a gradual alignment and re-alignment with major minorities (the Muslims in particular), the Dalit phenomenon would not have emerged with the power and confidence that it did in 1993. Even then it is no more than a beginning for what has happened is somewhat unexpected even as it has happened. It will continue to remain weak until its main thrust is merely in terms of demands made on the state for jobs and positions instead of undertaking transformation of civil society and thereby transforming the nature of the state, and until the pressure put on its own leadership from the grassroots is not strong enough. Also, there are continuing divisions both within the Dalits and vis-a-vis the backwards and there is continuing to be disproportionate

dependence on personalities most of whom happen to be unreliable in the long run. All the same, in rolling back the threat of fascism combined with fundamentalism, the role of the Dalit movement is likely to prove historic.

The Dalit movement is also distinctive in some other respects compared to the new social movements or the alternatives movement on major issues, especially in respect of the nature of struggle against dominant forces. It poses the question as what to emphasise more, western hegemony or caste domination within India, reflecting the issue posed much earlier during the Independence movement as to what was more important—social emancipation or political autonomy. What is more important: autonomy (and agitational politics) of the community or autonomy of the nation in the international order? If it is both, how to reconcile the two? We seem to be back to the Ambedkar-Gandhi controversy. The same is the case with the overall critique of modernity and of the western civilisational thrust that is to a degree central to the 'alternatives movement' and to many of the new social movements. The Dalits' expectation and strategy seems to be designed to challenge the dominant castes by means of education, employment and special rights, in short a struggle against the system that begins with challenging injustices within it, thinking of the struggle against imperialism and other such things as of second order importance. Or, as some of them would say, re-define the nature of imperialism in essentially social terms—both globally and locally.

Similarly, carrying further such a perspective, the more the social question acquires primacy, the more the return of a wholly different set of critics, reformers and revolutionaries than those propelled by the Congress movement and overshadowed by Gandhi—Ambedkar, Phule, the Periyar, a whole variety of regional heroes and 'sants' (including many from the Bhakti movement) revered

by various castes and communities, that were hitherto peripheralised by mainstream Hinduism, with some recalling of humanistic and socialist thinkers—M. N. Roy, Raja Rammohan Roy, many of the old liberals who were committed to eradication of various evils in Hindu society before Gandhi arrived on the scene and pushed into the background the whole social dimension of national liberation. We are yet to begin to grasp the larger ramifications of the Dalit movement, once it takes roots. It is likely to rekindle prevailing ideologies with new rallying points and in the process indigenise social theory.[...]

PERSPECTIVE FOR DALIT MOVEMENT

There is no shortage of sensitive and committed people in castes and classes occupying the middle spaces in the country. One has only to watch the deeply moving plays and films, read the highly unnerving reportage on social oppression and state terror, gauge the stirring of the depths of our consciousness through literary and other humanistic efforts (the mobilisation of the nation's creative artists and literateurs after 6 December 1992 by Sahmat being only one example of it), alongside the Dalit poetry, the highly disturbing 'feminist' exposes, the moving appeals of citizens on the march protesting against the agonising reports on atrocities, rampages and rapes, the inspiring chronicles of micro-movements of tribals and other 'indigenous' peoples struggling to retain and enrich their land and forests, their ancestral heritage and their holistic worldviews. What the Dalit movement needs to do is to take all this in and to provide a new vanguard of social change. In the process, broad-base and deepen the social and cultural terrain of the 'Dalit movement'.

Such an integral vision is not going to be easy to put on the ground. It is not an abstract academic exercise one is talking about. Actually, even as an act of imagination, it

does not exist anywhere. At no point in the history of ideas has there emerged a truly integrated vision that could steer humanity to a coherent future that could be pursued realistically and could mobilise a combination of hope and determination. At each juncture in the long travails of the human enterprise, the normative and ideational efforts failed to generate relevant interventions in the social terrain that could really reach out. The Encyclopaedists (who tried to lay an intellectual foundation for the European Enlightenment) tried this in vain. We have tried to show in this essay how the liberal democratic variation of it and, though much more radically conceived, the Marxist variation too failed to respond and reach out to the ideological needs and the praxis that socially oppressed peoples and communities called for. From the more spiritual and moral domains, Gandhi and his disciples have failed to reach out to them while the philosophical outpourings of Sri Aurobindo and Ramana Maharshi reached out even less; by and large they remained confined to the pulpit. Yet, the mere fact of the inadequacy of prevailing ideological models should not numb our senses and detract us from the required efforts to pick up the threads and provide a new beginning. For one must continue to hope and keep struggling so that out of the myriad churnings of the same human enterprise a relevant future can take shape. The Dalit movement in India should be considered as part of that churning.

KOSAMBI AND
THE QUESTIONS OF CASTE*

KUMKUM ROY

Kosambi remains one of the most challenging and demanding of historians. His hypotheses may sometimes seem to border on the realm of speculation, we may often find it difficult to keep pace with his arguments, almost invariably presented with an impatient erudition, yet his concerns with historicising the early Indian past continue to inform our understanding, just as we revisit his wide-ranging methodologies, often eclectic in the best sense of the term.[...]

It is critical to use the occasion of Kosambi's centenary to return to the issues which drew one of the best mathematical minds of the last century away from the domain of formulae and theorems into a relentless quest for origins.

Caste assumed a certain centrality in this quest, as it became, in Kosambi's understanding, a category through which to understand socio-economic differences. It figured explicitly as a vital element in two of the six stages into which Kosambi classified Indian history in an article ('Stages in Indian History') published in 1954. It was also implicit in his understanding of the first stage, which he identified with the Harappan civilisation; he often suggested that the social institutions of the period left their imprint on later developments. The second stage, which he referred to as Aryanisation (Kosambi 2002: 58), was characterised by Kosambi in terms of technological changes, a shift from bronze to iron. It was also a period of

socio-economic transformation, defined in terms of a shift from a pastoral-nomadic tribal organisation with a two-caste system to four caste-classes. The third phase was defined in terms of agrarian and political expansion. The former, according to Kosambi, was made possible by harnessing the labour force of the fourth *varna*, the Shudra, while the latter was typified by the expansion of the Magadhan/Mauryan empire.

CASTE AND CLASS

As is evident, caste was undoubtedly one of the most significant categories in Kosambi's understanding of early Indian history. At one level, he equated the institution, often explicitly, with class. In his classic formulation, for instance, he stated, '*Caste is an important reflection of the actual relations of production, particularly at the time of its formation*' (ibid.: xxiii, emphasis original). More elaborately, he wrote (ibid.: 59):

India has a unique social division, the (endogamous) caste system. *Caste is class at a primitive level of production, a religious method of forming social consciousness in such a manner that the primary producer is deprived of his surplus with the minimum coercion.* This is done with the adoption of local usages into religion and ritual, being thus the *negation* of history by giving fictitious sanction from "times immemorial" to any new development, the actual change being denied altogether. To this extent and at a low level of commodity production, it is clear that an *Asiatic Mode did exist*, reaching over several stages; at least, the term is applicable to India, whatever the case elsewhere.

Three critical, if somewhat conflicting ideas find expression in this paragraph: one, an equation of caste with class (under delimited conditions, it is true), an idea that Kosambi frequently reiterated and occasionally substantiated. The second was the religio-ritual dimension of caste, and its implications for understanding of historical change. Here Kosambi seemed to suggest that caste both represented change as well as became a means of denying it. Many of his detailed studies on specific dimensions of caste relations focused on this particular aspect in all its complexity.

The third idea pertains to an association between caste and social (and by extension historical) stagnation, typified by the Asiatic mode of production. It is possible, with hindsight, to see that the reconstructions of caste as a dynamic institution that Kosambi developed with painstaking scholarship informed with imagination, expressed in his typically provocative and incisive style, was at variance with the soporific societies considered characteristic of the Asiatic mode of production. Perhaps we can explain his invocation of the Asiatic mode in terms of his exasperation with the pace and direction of social change in his own milieu: we find him reverting, time and again, to the hope that the caste system would wither away. In 1953 ('The Study of Ancient Indian Tradition'), he wrote (*ibid.*: 415):

Its [the caste system's] supposed unshakeability and inherent strength vanish as soon as new forms of production come in: when railways jumble people together regardless of caste and are much more efficient as well as cheaper for the passenger than a bullock cart; when factories produce better goods cheaper, employing labour that has no caste-guild technical secrets of any use at the machine. The modern Indian city implies productive relations not

based upon caste, often in conflict with caste, whence the system is least effective in our cities, in contrast to the villages.

Sadly, these hopes, as indeed many others, have been belied by the historical processes that Kosambi tried to both understand and shape.

DOES CASTE EQUAL CLASS?

One of the ways in which Kosambi developed the equation between caste and class was through his analysis of the category of the shudra, arguing that this social group initially equated with the dasa, represented slaves maintained by the community, who later acquired a position almost identical with that of the Spartan helots. In other words, he visualised the shudra as constituting a class of more or less dependent labourers with virtually no independent access to productive resources. This was spelt out in stark clarity in one of his earliest articles titled 'The Emergence of National Characteristics among Three Indo-European Peoples' that appeared in 1939:

The most important function of the system was to prevent the worker, the śūdra, learning the use of weapons and from learning to read and write. He had no share in the culture of his age and country. He could not resort to armed revolt. There remained no way for him to keep his traditions alive, if indeed he had had any in the pre-Aryan days; no means of expressing his agony or communicating extensively with his fellow sufferers: no escape except through religion. Even a change of rulers did not bring about a change of caste. The Brahman relieved the warrior caste of the need of constantly policing the state to prevent an armed uprising. The benefits of an extensive

helotage were obtained without Spartan efforts.
(Ibid.: 758)

At the same time, in an essay titled 'Early Stages of the Caste System in Northern India' that appeared in 1946, he held that (ibid.: 196):

It should not be forgotten, on the credit side of the caste system, that the early reduction of the *śūdra* to serfdom or helotage freed India from slavery and slave-trading on a large scale. It also allowed new land to be opened up and settled with an early development of a stable agrarian economy which gave the country its economic power as well as its basic unity in spite of great local variations.

Located as we are in the twenty-first century, in a world complicated by the diverse manifestations of globalisation, we might find it difficult to share Kosambi's optimistic vision of progress at the cost of those located at the bottom of the socio-economic hierarchy.

Yet, fortunately for us, Kosambi pursued the specific with as much, if not more zeal than he brought to his quest for generalisations. This is evident, for instance, in the short piece titled 'The Working Class in the *Amarakośa*' that appeared in 1954-55. Here he argued that the organising principle of the text was hierarchical (ibid.: 285 ff). Having established this, he went on to elucidate the working of this principle in the case of the 'shudra varga'. This included several categories ranging from the Kayastha (scribe) to the *chandala* (one of the 'untouchable' categories according to the brahmanical tradition) regarded as the offspring of 'mixed' marriages between men and women belonging to different varnas. More specifically, the list included several crafts groups: the garland-maker, potter, mason, weaver, tailor, painter, armourer, leather-worker, blacksmith,

goldsmith, bangle-maker, coppersmith and carpenter. Also present were those who provided services, including the barber and washerman, as well as a whole range of entertainers. They were followed by hunters, trappers and butchers, who were succeeded by labourers, the Bhrtaka, Karmakara and the Vaitanika (labourers and wage earners) amongst others. Further down the list were various categories of near servile and servile populations. They in turn were succeeded by the chandalas, Nisadas (forest people), Sabaras, Pulindas (tribal groups) and Mlecchas (a term used to designate a wide range of 'outsiders'). The list ended with a set of animals including the dog, followed by a set of terms for thieves. By drawing attention to such lists and their implications, Kosambi moved away from the relatively simplistic equation between shudras and helots to a far more complex socio-economic scenario, one that had scope for dynamism and diversity. In this, one can see ideas that were developed, more or less simultaneously, by that other giant of Marxist investigations into early India, Ram Sharan Sharma, whose classic study of the shudras in ancient India was produced around the same time.

Kosambi's reflections on the Vaisya were relatively less substantial. While he recognised the importance of the vaisya 'settler' and his crucial role as surplus-producer and tax-payer (ibid.: 63), this did not extend into more detailed investigations. Could this be because of the relative invisibility of the vaisya in textual representations and/or as some would argue, the existence of alternative forms of social identity that did not neatly correspond with varna categories?

Also worth noting is that Kosambi did not develop the complement of the shudra-helot equation at any length. In other words, he did not expend intellectual energy in trying to establish that the Brahmanas and/or Kshatriyas exercised a monopoly over productive resources. Clearly, Kosambi was not preoccupied with defining the material

bases of these varna categories. As we will see, his discussions on both these categories, especially the former, were substantial. However, these focused on issues of socio-political identity and the ways in which ritual was both envisaged and enacted.

As is evident, even as Kosambi argued that caste is class, the equation was, for him, rarely simplistic, or even simple. In 'Living Prehistory in India' that appeared in 1967, he pointed out that there are categories that appear to be tribal in present-day (as well as past) caste lists (ibid.: 31-33). This, according to him, merited explanation. He worked with a definition of tribes as being typically food-gathering peoples, characterised, amongst other things, by a bounded homogeneous social universe. This homogeneity was maintained by prohibitions on marriage outside the group, and restrictions on sharing food with strangers. In other words, he suggested that two of the typical features of the caste system, connubium and commensality in the jargon of sociologists, owed their origin to tribal practices.

At the same time, Kosambi was quick to point out that the acceptance of these practices within the framework of caste society did not mean that tribal people were treated with respect. Their position, he argued, depended on their ability to generate resources in general and produce a surplus in particular. He suggested that tribes people who were assimilated within the caste order would have had a higher status than those who remained outside, because the shift to food production, that he considered typical of caste societies, would enable them to support larger populations. In an essay titled 'The Basis of Ancient Indian History' that appeared in 1955, he wrote (ibid.: 312):

The major historical change in ancient India was not between dynasties but in the advance of agrarian village settlements over tribal lands,

metamorphosing tribesmen into peasant cultivators, or guild craftsmen.[...]

IN SEARCH OF ORIGINS

Kosambi often attempted to distinguish between the origin of the caste system and later developments within the institution. Let us examine how he visualised the first of these processes. He contextualised this in terms of a pre-existing stratified society, that of the Harappan civilisation. The first plank of the argument was that urbanism presupposed social hierarchies. This in itself is unproblematic and may seem almost self-evident. Where Kosambi stepped in with a degree of imagination and, some would perhaps feel, unwarranted speculation was in suggesting that priesthood and ritual authority were probably important in maintaining social control in Harappan society. From this, he went on to suggest that survivors of the Harappan priesthood negotiated with the Aryan ruling elite. These complex negotiations and interactions, according to him ('On the Origin of Brahmin Gotras', originally published in 1950), resulted in the emergence of the four-fold varna order, with the brahmana claiming ritual superiority, while conceding political precedence to the kshatriya (ibid.: 126).

One of the most explicit and lucid statements of this appeared in 'Early Stages of the Caste System in Northern India' (ibid.: 200):

It is at least plausible to assume that these Brāhmanas were associated with the rich pre-Aryan Indus valley culture, discovered by our archaeologists; a culture that may have been destroyed by Aryan invaders or died out because of the shift of the Indus. This passage-over of sections of the conquered as priests to the conquerors would account for the many discrepancies between Vedic and epic records, and for the rewriting of so much

Indian tradition. It would account also for the early systematic development of Sanskrit grammar, generally necessary when a complicated foreign language has to be studied. In the same way, the astounding development of religious philosophy in India at a very early date again supports the hypothesis of violent assimilation as it speaks for the unhappy existence of a cultured priest-class.

The process that Kosambi thus reconstructed enabled him to explain variations and changes within the brahmanical tradition.

However, he could hardly have anticipated that nearly 60 years later, the relationship between the Harappans and the Aryans would become, to use a popular term, 'controversial' in more ways than one. In a situation where, in the twenty-first century, we now have a vociferous view proclaiming the identity of the Harappan and the Vedic, we may soon have a curious situation where some of the contents of Kosambi's scholarship are selectively appropriated, to suggest 'parallels' between the two traditions. What possibly prevents such co-option is the distaste with which Kosambi's overarching Marxist perspective is viewed in such circles.

On the other hand, most Marxist and many non-Marxist historians find themselves committed to emphasising the disjunctures between the Harappan and the Vedic (and sometimes later) traditions, and are suspicious, perhaps justifiably, of notions of survival and continuity from the former into the latter. In other words, there is an implicit if not an explicit distancing from the origins of caste as envisaged by Kosambi. Some may also suggest that looking for an originary moment for this complex institution may be an exercise of limited relevance.

SPREAD OF CASTE

In a sense, Kosambi's ideas on the ways in which caste was perpetuated and spread to several parts of the subcontinent are perhaps more relevant today. In 'The Basis of Ancient Indian History' he conceptualised this as the outcome of two simultaneous processes:

First, the kings use brahmanism and village settlement to make themselves independent of tribal usage and tribal economy, and to introduce caste as a regular class structure into their territory; secondly, the brahmins themselves accept all sorts of local superstition, ritual, worship, even service of guilds, becoming a cartilage group which secured the adherence to society of elements that would otherwise have been antagonistic. (Ibid.: 320)

To paraphrase his other well-known formulation, he seemed to be suggesting that caste relations were generated both from above and below. He cited examples of the complexities generated by this process. Given the nature of sources, these pertain to ruling elites. These included the classic case of the Satavahanas who claimed to be brahmanas, a somewhat anomalous identity for a ruling lineage. To complicate matters further, they married into the ruling Saka lineage of the region (ibid.: 321). The Sakas, as indeed several other social groups, were designated as mleccha within the brahmanical tradition.

Also worth revisiting are his ideas on the 'Indo-Aryan' Nose Index' (ibid.: 524ff) originally formulated in 1958. While the specificities and technicalities might seem obscure to the social historian, what is evident is Kosambi's steadfast refusal to reduce caste to race. Particularly noteworthy is his denial of the possibility that variations in physical appearance, such as they were, could be explained mainly or solely in terms of genetics. He stressed the need

to consider other factors that could influence physiognomy including diet, occupation and environment. Additionally, he pointed to the weaknesses of the sampling procedures adopted. While supposedly random, these were in fact biased in favour of the pre-suppositions with which Risley, the proponent of the nasal-index/caste status equation, worked. Besides, he drew attention to the fact that caste endogamy, with its implications of frozen social relations was a brahmanical ideal. The real world was far messier, with caste mobility as an option that was open to the wealthy and the powerful. In his inimitable style, he pointed out that in earlier times:

Greedy brahmins found without difficulty if suitably rewarded, for any person an eponym among the "Aryan" heroes. Moreover, there exists a quite expensive ritual of "rebirth", that permits a change in the caste affinity, independent of the nose index. (Ibid.: 533)

In other words, Kosambi dismissed the possibility of caste having its roots in some immutable, natural, biological state in no uncertain terms.[...]

THE TEXT AND THE FIELD

I had mentioned at the outset that Kosambi's methodologies were often eclectic. On the one hand was his insistence that the scholar needed to step beyond the library or the archive. Consider for instance, his characteristically scathing dismissal of the nineteenth-century debates on widow remarriage in the essay titled 'Combined Methods in Indology' (1963):

That 85 per cent of the population in their immediate locality allowed widows to remarry (and permitted divorce when either party felt aggrieved)

made no impression upon the scholars nor upon the authorities on Hindu Law. (Ibid.: 4)

As he never tired of repeating, fieldwork, which included observing tangible material artefacts as well as the more intangible modes of communication in lived, quotidian environments, was, according to him, indispensable for both understanding the past and shaping the future. Kosambi often suggested analogies between present-day practices/events and those of the past. In the light of more recent investigations and more complex ethnographies, it is possible to dismiss some of the specific correlations that he worked out. Nonetheless, the acknowledgement that the frontiers between past and present were porous rather than water-tight allowed him to arrive at insights denied to those whom he described sarcastically as 'avoiding any disagreeable contact with anthropology, sociology, or reality' (ibid.: 4).

The immense potential of such 'disagreeable contact' is evident in his discussion on the *gotra* system (ibid.: 175). Here he pointed out that while the brahmanical textual tradition was seemingly congealed, there were virtually infinite variations on the ground: in south India alone, vaiśyas, who were ascribed a single gotra according to the 'high' tradition, had as many as a thousand gotras of their own.

It is not surprising that Kosambi viewed the vast textual corpus (mainly Sanskritic) of early India with suspicion and scepticism. In his own words (ibid.: 190):

In attempting to trace briefly the main features of the earlier caste system down to the age of the Buddha (fifth century BC) we shall have to keep in mind the brahmanic origin of most Sanskrit texts, and the brahmanic transmission of all of them. As far as accurate historical evidence is concerned,

most of these are mere verbiage; an occasional reference is all we have to piece out Indian history, the confusion being aggravated by fantastically ignorant late brāhmana commentators, as well as by that fact that it is a poor Sanskrit word that has less than a dozen meanings.

He used his formidable grasp of ancient and early medieval Sanskrit, Pali and Prakrit textual traditions to highlight the complexities of the caste system in practice. His discussion on the heterogeneity of the category of the Aryan, illustrated through the example of the people designated as Madra (ibid.: 19-21), is a case in point. Starting from the acknowledged association of the Madras with the north-west, he established that this region in general was recognised as an area where scholarship flourished. The grammarians Pānini and Patanjali belonged to the region; it was also regarded as a centre of learning in the Brhadāranyaka Upanisad. Further, this was independently corroborated by the Jatakas, which almost invariably represented Taxila as a centre of learning.

At the same time, the *Mahabharata* contains a famous (or infamous) diatribe, attributed to Karna, condemning the Madras as people amongst whom norms of 'proper' womanly behaviour are not maintained, and where the ideal constancy of the varna order has been replaced by a state of unprecedented flux. Other sections of the epic suggest that the region was associated with distinctive marital practices, including the payment of bride-price. Kosambi showed that this representation had parallels with the descriptions of social conditions in the region found in Pali canonical literature. He also drew attention to the irony implicit in such opinions being ascribed to Karna, whose own social origins are depicted as being obscure. Note the range of sources Kosambi marshalled to establish his point that the meaning of the term Aryan was context-

specific rather than immutable: works on Sanskrit grammar, the Upanisads, Pali texts, and the *Mahabharata*. And he concluded the discussion by reverting, typically, to present-day practice:

It might be added that the custom [of marriage with bride-price] is permissible and normal in some 80 per cent or more of the Maharashtrian population; brahmins do not hesitate to officiate (for a consideration) at such weddings. (Ibid.: 21)

Consider another, seemingly trivial instance of the way in which he deployed his virtually encyclopaedic knowledge ('Development of the Gotra System', 1960). In discussing the range of meanings that could be assigned to the term 'vrata' he suggested that it could be connected with the notion of food taboos: 'vrata has also the meaning "feeding exclusively upon", proved by *madhu-vrata* for a bee' (ibid.: 173). It was this phenomenal ability to draw on both minute details as well as on broader issues of perspective and context that enabled Kosambi to weld together insights from explorations into texts and the field into complex and challenging analyses.

TOWARDS SUBVERSIVE HISTORIES OF CASTE

Rich and relevant as Kosambi's investigations of caste were, it is necessary to recognise that there were areas that remained unexplored, questions that remained unasked, and consequently unaddressed within his framework. Kosambi attempted to work with the equation between caste and class, defining both with a somewhat narrow precision. Although his own explorations often led him beyond this postulate, one senses that it was a constricting factor as well. The equation was useful up to a point, beyond which it deflected his attention away from certain other facets of caste.

Present-day sociologists,¹ for instance, have drawn attention to the category of dominant castes, not necessarily identified as brāhmanas or ksatriyas, who owe their power to their control over land in specific localities. Searching for such categories in the early Indian textual and epigraphic material is obviously an avenue worth exploring. Reconstructions of the histories of ruling lineages in the early medieval period point to the potential of such investigations.

Other studies² have focused on how exchange (including gift-exchange) constitutes social relations, especially those of caste. While the ingredients of these exchanges do not necessarily or always fit in within easily identifiable means of production, they are nonetheless significant in creating and maintaining caste identities and relations.

But perhaps the most substantive challenges to earlier understandings of caste have emerged from Marxist feminist and Dalit feminist perspectives. The former is exemplified in the Indian context in the writings of Uma Chakravarti (2003).³ Chakravarti draws attention to the need to re-conceptualise both caste and class in terms of gender. This rests on an understanding of class as having a sexual dimension—to be understood not simply in terms of control over inanimate or non-human material resources, but also in terms of control of sexuality and reproduction (both biological and social).

Chakravarti documents how, in both contemporary and early contexts, caste identities are/were often shaped through the regulation of female sexuality. Thus, claims to high caste status are/were often bolstered by the seclusion of women. Thus, gender identities are implicated in and in turn feed into the construction of caste identities. To cite an example that Kosambi would have immediately identified with, restrictions on widow remarriage are often an index of high caste status, ensuring that access to the sexual

resources of the woman rest in the hands of the privileged men who constitute her 'protectors'.

Explorations of the engendered nature of caste can, then, radically alter some of our earlier ideas of both structure and process. Kosambi's stimulating analyses of goddess traditions, where he documented how these modes of worship underwent a process of uneasy accommodation within the brahmanical tradition, came tantalisingly close to opening up these possibilities, but did not lead to any major reformulation of his core ideas.

Dalit feminist studies pose further challenges—systematically contesting tendencies to normalise and naturalise a top-down brahmanical perspective on caste as the only or dominant understanding⁴ by drawing attention to 'histories of caste oppression, struggles and resistance' (Rege 2006: 13). As Rege points out (ibid.: 67):

The theory and practice of women's studies has, from its inception, underscored the relation between knowing and transforming; dalit feminism qualifies this relation further. It places at the centre of knowing, not the unmarked category "woman" but dalit women who have an interest in overthrowing the system and not rising within it.

It is in this context that Kosambi's reasons for engaging with history bear reiteration:

The principal aim of history, as written hitherto, has been the presentation of great events in a chronological sequence. However, the relative importance of events rarely appears the same to people of another time, place, civilisation, or class bias, so that a mere chronicle does not suffice. The course of social development, the inner causes which ultimately manifest themselves in the

striking events, the driving forces which underlie great movements, have to be made clear before any work can be dignified by the name of serious history. Yet this type of analysis is not always welcome to some historiographers. They, or the people who really condition their version of history, are unwilling to face the inevitable consequences of this procedure. For the implication is necessarily that all history can be so analysed, hence current events; but if so, it follows that the course of events can be influenced by deliberate action, that history has hereafter to be consciously made by those that live it, not merely set down after a safe interval of time by the professional historian. This is clearly dangerous to those who would suffer by the change, usually those in power. Thus such historical writing is labelled subversive. History then remains a means of escape, a romantic pastime, a profession, or a method of inducing submissiveness; it cannot become a scientific pursuit. (Ibid.: 407)

The invitation to write subversive histories remains as challenging as when it was first issued by Kosambi more than 50 years ago ('The Study of Ancient Indian Tradition', 1953). Perhaps the best tribute we can pay to his memory while celebrating his birth centenary is to remind ourselves of the need to write such histories.

CASTE AND ECONOMIC DISCRIMINATION

*Causes, Consequences and Remedies**

SUKHADEO THORAT AND KATHERINE S. NEWMAN

The Economist magazine recently observed, 'There is no evidence that [Indian] companies discriminate against [the lower castes]', and argued that the relegation of low caste Indians to the bottom of the social structure is a function not of discrimination in the private sector but of the actions of a different culprit altogether: '... government, and the rotten educational system it has created' (*Business and Caste in India: With Reservations* 6 October 2007).

That the Indian educational system has a long way to go to achieve caste, class and regional parity is beyond dispute. Yet, we should not move so fast in declaring the private sector free of discrimination, nor should we assume that human capital differentials alone explain the 'lack of advancement' that *The Economist* notes among the lower castes. Indian society is characterised by persistent and pervasive inter-group inequality in economic life. The current pattern of inter-group inequality closely matches the economic scheme of the caste system. Previous research has provided a reasonably clear picture of the magnitude of inter-caste inequality in income, but has not demonstrated to what extent inequality today is attributable to the denial of economic rights in the past, and to what extent it is attributable to forms of ... social exclusion and discrimination that persist in modern India.

In order to develop appropriate remedies to eliminate caste inequality, we need to understand precisely how caste affects individuals' economic lives, how the economy

interacts with caste values and attitudes, and what behaviour produces persistent inequality and deprivation for groups based on their caste, ethnicity or religion.

This issue of economic discrimination has not been central to mainstream social science research in India. Hence we have limited insight about the forms and nature of economic discrimination associated with group identities. In the volume that we have jointly edited, we focus on contemporary patterns of discrimination in the formal labour market, using methods originally developed to study discrimination in the United States. The papers in the volume are the fruit of a two-year collaboration between researchers at the Indian Institute for Dalit Studies and sociologists supported by Princeton University's Institute for International and Regional Studies. Taken as a whole, they document widespread patterns of discrimination and underlying attitudinal orientations—based on caste and religion—that contribute to inequality in employment and wages in the modern, formal sector of India's economy.

SOCIAL EXCLUSION

Buvinic (2005) summarises the meaning of social exclusion as follows: 'The inability of an individual to participate in the basic political, economic and social functioning of society', and goes on to add that it involves, 'the denial of equal access to opportunities imposed by certain groups in society upon others'. This definition captures three distinguishing features of social exclusion: it affects culturally defined groups, is embedded in social relations between them, and results in deprivation or low income for those excluded (Hann 1997; Sen 2000). It is critical to take note of the particular form of exclusion in the Indian context, where ascriptive rather than achieved characteristics are the basis of exclusion. The former are not amenable to alteration as a consequence of individual

agency and cannot, therefore, be regarded in any fashion as a matter of personal responsibility.

Amartya Sen (2000) has drawn worldwide attention to the dimensions of social exclusion. He draws distinctions between situations in which individuals are kept out (or left out) and circumstances of inclusion (including forced inclusion) on deeply unfavourable terms. Either type can generate adverse effects. Sen also differentiates between active exclusion—blocking opportunity through deliberate policy interventions on the part of government or private agents—and passive exclusion, which does not rely on these interventions, but may lead to similarly negative outcomes.

Discrimination is clearly a particular kind of exclusion and it can take on an active or a passive form. Active exclusion through discrimination will see agents systematically refusing to hire or accept the participation of members of a social group despite their formal qualifications (or even overqualification), while routinely favouring members of other groups who are equally or even less qualified. The consequences of discrimination can lead to deprivation indirectly, through passive discrimination in which discouragement and lower self-confidence results in poor performance, or through direct routes that limit access to income or education that is mobility enhancing.

Market-based discrimination has received considerable attention by scholars of race in the US (Pager 2003) and by scholars of caste in India (Weisskopf 2004; Thorat et al. 2005). In all instances, we speak here of restrictions (formal and informal) on the entry of subordinate groups to the market and/or through selective inclusion with unequal treatment. Labour market discrimination can transpire in the domain of hiring, or in wages, or through working conditions, and opportunities for upward mobility. We can fairly speak of discrimination when two persons with the same education, training, work experience, and hence

identical human capital, differing only in personal characteristics that have no implications for productivity, are treated unequally, with the minority group member denied jobs, given lower wages, or unfavourable working conditions and the majority (or higher status) individual favoured in these domains.

Occupational discrimination occurs when members of subordinate groups face restrictions that prevent their entry into the occupations of majority group members, or face differential treatment in the acquisition of factors and services necessary to enter the market (e.g., credit restrictions related to caste, exclusions from property markets, etc.).

In short, social exclusion—in its more specific manifestation as discrimination—refers to the processes through which groups are wholly or partially restricted from full participation in the economic, educational and social institutions that define social membership. Exclusion involves both the act of restricting access and the consequences that follow, principally forms of deprivation.

In the Indian context, exclusion revolves around institutions that discriminate, isolate, shame and deprive subordinate groups on the basis of identities like caste, religion and gender. In these papers, we are principally concerned with caste-based discrimination and secondarily with exclusion based on religion. The role of caste in labour market matching is particularly critical, since it is in this domain that the most vigorous attempts to redress past inequities have been undertaken, principally through the reservation policy. This legislation has proven to be contentious and has recently generated street protests as reservations have been extended to professional education (e.g., medical school). It is, therefore, important to review what we know about caste as a source of inequality before introducing the empirical papers.

Caste has long been used to regulate economic life in India (for a thorough historical treatment, see Dirks 2001). The economic organisation of the caste system is based on the division of the population into a hierarchical order of social groups that determine the economic rights of members, which are determined by birth and are hereditary in the strictest sense of the term (Akerlof 1976; Scoville 1991; Lal 1989; Ambedkar 1936 and 1987). A community-based system of enforcement regulates caste privileges by means of social ostracism, violence, and economic penalties that find their justification in elements of Hindu religion (Lal 1989; Ambedkar 1936 and 1987). Although strictly speaking a Hindu tradition, castes have emerged in religions that provide no theological justification for practices of exclusion or pollution, such as Islam, Sikhism, and other religions of India, chiefly because low-caste Hindus have attempted to escape the confines of their ascriptive identities through religious conversion.

Fixed economic rights defined by caste, with rigid barriers against change, leads to 'forced exclusion'—to use Sen's term—of one caste from the economic rights of another. In market economies, occupational immobility is the result as restrictions on access to land, labour, capital, credit, education, and other inputs and services necessary for commercial activity provide for differential capacities to participate. Entitlements to economic rights become narrower and narrower the farther down the hierarchical ladder of the caste system. Without intervention, classically untouchables, or Dalits, who lie at the very bottom of the social order, find themselves restricted to the most despised occupations and the lowest wages. Unable to interact freely with others in the market, Dalits find themselves simultaneously restricted in the economic sense and repressed as citizens, as they are—in practice, even if not in theory—denied civil rights (freedom of expression, equality before the law), political rights (the ability to

exercise political power) and socio-economic rights (claims to property, employment and education). Not surprisingly, we find at the bottom of the caste system individuals and social groups in disproportionate numbers, mired in poverty.

ECONOMIC CONSEQUENCES

Exclusion from access to markets has series of adverse consequences not only on income distribution but also on economic growth. Market failure associated with economic discrimination leads to lower economic growth, inequality in income, poverty and inter-group conflict.

Market failures are created via economic discrimination as an inefficient allocation of labour among firms emerges, and wages recede below the marginal product for workers of discriminated groups. By preventing free mobility of human labour, land, capital and entrepreneurship, the caste system creates imperfect, segmented, and monopolistic divisions in factor markets. Labour and capital fail to move from one occupation to another even when the wage rate and rate of return (on investment) is higher in alternative fields. Thus, factor immobility spurs gross inefficiency in resource allocation (Akerlof 1976; Scoville 1991; Lal 1989; Ambedkar 1936 and 1987).

Economic efficiency is also affected by reducing the job commitment and effort among workers who perceive themselves as victims of discrimination, and by reducing the magnitude of investment in human capital by discriminated groups because the return on their investment is weakened. This is far from the model of a perfectly competitive market economy (Birdsall and Sabot 1991).

By restricting the movement of labour between occupations, caste becomes a direct cause of voluntary unemployment for higher caste individuals and involuntary

unemployment for those at the bottom. Higher caste Hindus would generally prefer to opt out of the market for some time than to take up an occupation defined as polluting. For the low caste untouchables on the other hand, the restriction against claiming more prestigious occupations will compel them to remain involuntarily unemployed.

Jobs regarded as socially degrading, almost by definition, reduce the social status of those who hold them—scavenging being the classic example. Forced into these occupations on account of their caste origin, Dalits rarely experienced job satisfaction. Instead, as Ambedkar (1936) pointed out long ago, the jobs to which untouchables are restricted engender aversion, ill will and the desire to evade. The dignity of physical labour—a key aspect of jobs at the bottom of the status hierarchy—is nearly absent in the work ethic of the caste system and hence impacts the incentive to work in adverse ways. Hence, the caste system as a form of economic organisation lacks the elements that lead to the optimum use of resources. Moreover, because it is built on a foundation of restriction, the caste system fosters inter-group conflict that is socially harmful and diverts human resources to destructive ends.

REMEDIES AGAINST DISCRIMINATION

Given the virtues of increasing economic efficiency and growth, as well as reducing poverty and inequality, there is a compelling interest in diminishing the market discrimination. What, then, can be done?

Akerlof (1976) and Scoville (1991) have argued that social ostracism, coupled with economic penalties, acts to strengthen the caste system by creating deterrents to change. Only if the magnitude of the social costs (in terms of social isolation and deprivation), economic costs (transaction and enforcement) begin to outweigh the

economic gains (profit and surplus extraction), are we likely to see significant change in the shape of the caste system. Sadly, the opposite prevails: the cost of enforcement is low and the economic gains associated with exploited labour conspire to prevent change.

There is a view that in a competitive market situation, the firms/employers who indulge in discrimination face eroding profits—in theory. Therefore, pressure on firms, will self-correct discriminatory behaviour. In practice, however, labour market discrimination has been shown to be quite durable. Market discrimination will persist, if all firms practice discrimination. Further, not all markets are competitive. Indeed in developing countries, monopoly power looms large, providing employers with the power to discriminate at will. In the absence of opportunities to display their talents, groups that have been excluded will find it difficult to develop the necessary signals that will make clear what employers are missing by avoiding them.

The view that inefficiency and, therefore, pressure on firms, will self-correct discriminatory behaviour argues in favour of strengthening competitive markets as the solution to this vexing problem. Those who regard this as insufficient, argue instead, that an interventionist policy is necessary because self-correction takes too long or is weakened, particularly in societies like India with enormous surplus labour. Legal safeguards and ‘set asides’ or quotas governing access to land, labour, capital markets, product and consumer markets and social services including education, housing and healthcare, for these advocates, the only way we are likely to see discrimination abate.

INDIA’S DILEMMAS

India today is caught in the grip of a querulous debate over developing reservation policies for groups and communities

suffering from economic exclusion associated with caste, gender and religious identity. Most contentious is the notion that the policy which has governed the allocation of places in higher education, public employment and government itself should be extended to the private sector. Two policy directions have emerged—economic empowerment and equal opportunity.

The policy of economic empowerment is essentially directed towards improving the ownership of assets like agricultural land, capital for business, entrepreneurial skills and education. These measures are supposed to enhance the capacity of groups historically subjected to discrimination to develop businesses of their own and enhance their employability in industries and in occupations that pay well. These investments are a form of reparations—to lower castes, especially those formerly deemed untouchable, or to other backward castes, women and some religious minority groups—in recognition of the denial of equal economic rights from which they have suffered in the past. There is a reasonable degree of consensus over the legitimacy of this strategy.

However, when it comes to providing equal opportunity through instruments like reservations, we see considerable disagreement. It has been argued, particularly by private sector leaders, that discrimination is a problem of the past (Jodhka and Newman 2007). From this perspective, labour and other markets generally work in a neutral manner and access to job and other markets is, therefore, determined by merit and efficiency alone. As such there is no need of safeguards against possible market discrimination. Thus, while the policies for general economic empowerment of discriminated groups through human capital investment find favour, policies that guarantee access, particularly to employment, are fraught with disagreement. This is a struggle between social ideals, but fundamentally as well,

one that is based on disagreements about the empirical state of markets.

The volume that we jointly edited, *Blocked by Caste* (Thorat and Newman 2010) was conceived as a test of the proposition that discrimination is no longer an issue in Indian labour markets, particularly in the formal, private sector. It makes use of research techniques pioneered in the US to measure discrimination in quantitative terms and to identify attitudes and beliefs through qualitative means that contribute to discriminatory patterns of hiring on the part of participants in the matching process (employers and jobseekers). In order to focus as clearly as possible on discrimination, and screen out the most vexing inequalities in human capital, it focuses on the formal labour market and the most highly qualified jobseekers—graduates of the most prestigious universities in India. Admittedly, this does not cover the entire universe of questions that should be raised about discrimination in modern India. Yet, the volume poses questions in the context of the most advantaged applicants, who (in theory) face the lowest barriers at entry to favoured occupations since they possess formidable qualifications.

The papers in the volume establish that there is serious evidence of continued discriminatory barriers in the formal, urban labour market even for highly qualified Dalits and Muslims. Thorat and Attewell report the results of a field experiment which found that low caste and Muslim applicants who are equally or better qualified than high caste applicants are significantly less likely to pass through hiring screens among employers in the modern, formal sector in India. Jodhka and Newman present the results of a qualitative interview-based study of human resource managers, focusing on hiring practices. This research suggests that managers bring to the hiring process a set of stereotypes that make it difficult for very low caste and very high-caste applicants to succeed in the competition for

positions, while advantage falls to the middle. Deshpande and Newman focus on the experiences of equally qualified Dalit and non-Dalit cohort-mates from three major universities, who enter the labour market at the same time. This longitudinal project, which is still ongoing, shows that despite similar qualifications, the two groups expect—and, true to form, experience—divergent outcomes in the labour market. Dalit students bring weaker connections to the task and are far less likely to find jobs in the private sector. Finally, Madheswaran and Attewell conduct an econometric analysis of the National Sample Survey of India, which shows a 15 per cent wage penalty for Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) respondents, compared to otherwise equivalent higher-caste workers.

Taken together, the papers in our volume constitute an argument that far from fading as India modernises, the problem of discrimination remains a serious one—even at the very top of the human capital hierarchy. They cast some doubt on whether the natural operation of the market will be sufficient to correct this inefficiency in labour allocation.

This is not to suggest that investments in leveling the playing field are of no value. Clearly, Dalits who lack educational opportunity in childhood and adolescence will be greatly disadvantaged compared to those who have them (Dalit and non-Dalit). Dalit students who reach the best of India's universities, but are at a financial disadvantage because they bear the continuing burden of supporting their families, would benefit from additional financial aid so that they can concentrate on their studies just as more advantaged students do.

Yet, reaching the pinnacle of what Indian education has to offer is not sufficient to create full and open opportunity. The occupational and wage differentials that research documents reflect the accumulated benefits of family connections that enhance the matching process for high status students, while making it harder for the low status

but well-qualified students to compete. These studies also point to continuing attitudinal barriers that subject low-caste applicants for jobs in major companies, and people from remote tribal regions, to negative stereotypes that may overwhelm their formal accomplishments in the eyes of employers.

These observations—coupled with the shrinking size of the public sector—have prompted some advocates to argue in favour of extending reservations or some form of affirmative action to the private sector.... As the Jodhka and Newman's paper makes clear, this is firmly opposed by private sector leaders, not only because they prefer to avoid any form of regulation over hiring, but also because they are convinced that there is no problem of caste or religious prejudice in modern India. We believe the debate over policy remedies should proceed in the light of empirical evidence and we submit that our volume represents a first step in that direction.

UNTOUCHABILITY AND THE LAW*

MARC GALANTER

The Constitution does not define ‘untouchability’, nor is it clear what constitutes its ‘practice in any form’ or ‘a disability arising out of “untouchability”’. The English term ‘untouchability’ is of relatively recent coinage; its first appearance in print was in 1909¹ and, while it gained wide currency, it did not gain clarity. Although the meaning of the constitutional command still remains unclear in some important respects, the work of the courts so far provides some guidelines.[...]

No case involving the Untouchability Offences Act (UOA) has reached the Supreme Court and, since few petty criminal appeals do, it is not likely that the Supreme Court will play a significant role in interpreting the UOA². It seems fair to say that the UOA has not fared well in the high courts, in contrast with the earlier state legislation, which generally received favourable interpretations from these courts.[...] This unfavourable reception by the high courts seems to involve three problem areas: the requirement that the forbidden act be committed ‘on grounds of untouchability’; uncertainty about coverage of private property; and limitation of rights to those enjoyed by members of the same religious denomination.

THE ‘GROUND OF “UNTOUCHABILITY”’ PROBLEM

The principal substantive sections of the UOA forbid the denial of facilities and services ‘on the ground of “untouchability”’. This requirement of specific intent makes

it difficult to secure convictions, since states of mind are difficult to prove. The drafters of the UOA attempted to obviate this difficulty by reversing the onus of proof; the Act provides that, where any of the forbidden practices 'is committed in relation to a member of a Scheduled Caste ... the court shall presume, unless the contrary is proved, that such act was committed on the ground of Untouchability'.

Even accompanied by this presumption, the 'grounds of untouchability' requirement restricts the operation of the UOA to instances in which the accused's act proceeds from, or is accompanied by, a specific mental state. However, as we have seen the nature of this mental state is far from clear. Neither the Constitution nor the UOA defines untouchability; judges required to define it find it no easy matter. Government, the legislature and the courts all tend to define it denotatively—by pointing to well-known examples of its practice—rather than connotatively—by specifying boundary criteria. How then can the judge as trier of fact decide whether this complex and obscure notion of untouchability was a component of the mental state of the accused at the time of the purported offence? States of mind can only be inferred from observed behaviour. And observed behaviour may involve a complex admixture of motives: economic, religious, social and psychological. Making this imponderable mental state a part of the offence makes it difficult to deal with those patterns of discriminatory conduct whose incidence does not correspond precisely and directly with the touchable-untouchable distinction. For example, let us take the situations of what we may call 'tokenism', 'over-discrimination' and 'intervening motives'.

The potentialities for evading the UOA by 'tokenism' are demonstrated, if not exemplified, in the case of *Kandra Sethi vs Metra Sahu*, where a dhobi complained of exclusion from a village kirton. The defence was that dhobis as a class were not excluded, since the kirton had been

attended by a dhobi (apparently the dhobi headman). The court upheld the defence that the exclusion of the complainant was not, then, on the basis of his caste. The mere admission of one Untouchable was taken to defeat the 'grounds of untouchability' requirement. The Kerala High Court was much more sensitive to the problem of tokenism, when it took the contrary view in *Ramachandran Pillai vs State of Kerala*. Where the headmaster of a girls' school constituted a separate division exclusively of Harijan students, the fact that there were some Harijan students in other classes did not overcome the illegality of this segregation, for each individual student had equal right not to be singled out. Another situation, the reverse of 'tokenism', might be called 'over-discrimination'. Suppose discrimination is aimed not only at Untouchables but also at other low castes? The Allahabad High Court reversed the conviction of a hotel proprietor who had put up a sign intimating that the hotel would serve only Brahmins, Thakurs, Vaishyas, Kayasthas and Yadavanshis.³ The court held that since many other communities besides Harijans were not served, refusal to serve the latter was not on grounds of untouchability and, therefore, not an offence. Reversal of the burden of proof, attempted by the UOA, would not suffice to correct this anomalous result, for it is clear that the ground of discrimination here is broader than 'untouchability' as defined by the courts. However, individuation (as suggested by the Kerala High Court) would at least enable the court to focus on the case of the Untouchable complainant undistracted by the other exclusion.

A third problem with the 'grounds of untouchability' requirement is what we might call the problem of the 'intervening motive'. Suppose dhobis or restaurateurs who refuse service to Untouchables assign as their motive fear of loss of trade or of social standing? *State vs Banwari*,

decided under the United Provinces Removal of Social Disabilities Act, graphically and dramatically presents this problem: On the passing of the Act, the Chamars served notice on the barbers and dhobis of the village calling upon them to render services to them. When they did not agree, a Panchayat was called by the chamars; it was attended by ... [the dhobis]. In the Panchayat, the chamars and other people assembled there asked the [dhobis] to render service to the chamars. The chamars brought bundles of clothes to be washed. At first the [dhobis] agreed to render service and even accepted the bundles of clothes for washing. Then they said that they would reconsider the matter and held consultation with one another at some distance from the Panchayat, returned and told everybody that they had decided not to render service to the chamars and returned the bundles to them. They were pressed to reconsider that decision but they remained adamant and the Panchayat broke up.

Appealing their conviction under the Uttar Pradesh (UP) Act, the dhobis asserted that their refusal was not merely on the ground that the chamars were Untouchables, but also that if they rendered service to the chamars, they would lose the trade of other Hindus. The Uttar Pradesh court held that since this loss of custom would be the consequence of the fact that the chamars were Scheduled Castes (SCs), the reason for refusal of service reduced to their untouchability and was forbidden. The UP statute involved in Banwari did not contain 'on the ground of "untouchability"' language, but provided that no person should refuse to render services 'to any person merely on the ground that he belongs to a Scheduled Caste ...'. A less resolute court might easily have allowed the 'merely' to elevate the loss of trade argument into a good defence. (The language of the UOA is stronger in this respect, since it omits the restricting 'merely' or 'only' found in some state statutes.)[...]

The 'ground of "untouchability"' requirement, then does not prevent convictions under the Act, but it acts as a slope, inclining towards a restrictive interpretation of the Act. Judicial attentiveness, resoluteness, sympathy and inventiveness are required to isolate this imponderable state of mind and resist the pull towards restrictive interpretation. Resistance of the kind displayed in Banwari and Ramachandran Pillai may sometimes be forthcoming, but a statute is not likely to be effective where it is dependent on extraordinary exertions of judicial energy to carry out its policy.

THE PRIVATE PROPERTY PROBLEM

A second weakness in the UOA is the equivocation in its coverage of facilities which are used by the 'public', but are not, technically, public. In *Benudhar Sahu vs State*, two Pano boys were prevented from drawing water from a privately-owned well used by most villagers. The high court reversed the conviction of the owner of the well on the ground that the boys had no right to use the well. The court was unwilling to measure their access to the well by the access of other villagers, but insisted that it be shown they had a right to use the well.

Merely because he was permitting other people to draw water from his well, it cannot be said that every villager had a right [to use] ... the well. The prosecution must affirmatively establish that the public had a right [to use] the well in question before the offence ... is established. It is not clear here that this conclusion is required by Section 4 (iv) of the UOA, which provides: Whoever on the ground of 'untouchability' enforces against any person any disability with regard to (iv) the use of, or access to, any river, stream, spring, well ... which other members of the public have a right to use or have access to.... It seems equally plausible that only a showing of public 'access' is

needed, not a showing of 'a right to use' in the public. In any event, this seems to leave the Untouchable with a remedy only against exclusion from places used by the public as of right. Since there is no exact correspondence between facilities ordinarily used for public life in villages and those which the public has an enforceable right to enter, Untouchables are left with restricted rights.⁴

The court below had convicted the well-owner for violation of Section 7 of the UOA which makes it an offence to prevent or obstruct 'any person from exercising any right accruing to him by reason of the abolition of "untouchability" under Article 17 of the Constitution'. The high court found there was no offence since 'no right accrued to the Pano boys to use the well ... merely by reason of the "untouchability" under Article 17 of the Constitution'. However, since Article 17 establishes a right not to be the subject of untouchability 'in any form', it might be argued that it includes disabilities respecting use of privately-owned property which is part of the 'public' life of the village. There is no limitation in Article 17 which restricts its operation to property that the public has a 'right' to use.⁵ A similar situation is found in *State of MP vs Tikaram*, where a villager organised a recitation of the *Ramayana* in an open space (of unspecified ownership) and invited the public to come and make offerings over the book. Untouchables were refused permission to make offerings admittedly on the grounds of untouchability. The high court held that this was not a violation of the UOA since this was not a 'place of public worship'. Again, the UOA failed to secure for Untouchables the same rights of everyday use that were enjoyed by the public in general.

THE 'DENOMINATION' PROBLEM

Crucial sections of the UOA provide that an Untouchable can enter and use premises open to other persons

‘professing the same religion or belonging to the same religious denomination or any section thereof’. Section 3 of the UOA provides that:

Whoever on the ground of “untouchability” prevents any person (i) from entering any place of public worship which is open to other persons professing the same religion or belonging to the same religious denomination or any section thereof, as such person; or (ii) from worshipping or offering prayers or performing any religious service in any place of public worship, or bathing in, or using the waters of any sacred tank, well, spring or water course, in the same manner and to the same extent as is permissible to other persons professing the same religion or belonging to the same religious denomination or any section thereof, as such person; shall be punishable with imprisonment which may extend to six months, or with fine which may extend to five hundred rupees or with both.

The scope of the rights conferred by this provision (and other crucial sections of the Act) depends on the meaning of the phrases, ‘the same religion’ and ‘the same religious denomination or section thereof’. The law-makers, presumably for the purpose of clarifying these terms, added an explanation that: persons professing the Buddhist, Sikh, or Jain religion or persons professing the Hindu religion in any of its forms or developments including Virashaivas, Lingayats, Adivasis, followers of Brahmo, Prarthana, Arya Samaj and the Swaminarayan Sampradaya shall be deemed to be Hindus.

In spite of this explanation, the courts have resisted the implication that temple-entry provisions obviate denominational and sectarian distinctions. In *State vs Puranchand* it was held that denial to Untouchables of entry

to Jain temples is not a violation of Section 3 of the UOA, since those excluded are not of the 'same religion as those admitted'. The UOA, according to the court, does not abolish the distinction between Hindus and Jains, nor does it create any new right—either for Untouchables or for caste Hindus—to enter Jain temples. It only puts the rights of Untouchables on parity with the right of 'others of the same religion'; i.e. Untouchables have the same rights to enter a Jain temple that were previously enjoyed by caste Hindus. If the temple was not open to the latter before, it is no offence to exclude Untouchables from it now. Jain Untouchables, if there are any, would of course now have the right to enter Jain temples since the latter are open to persons of the 'same religion'.

This interpretation of the temple-entry provisions is supported by the absence in the UOA of any evidence of intent to confer any new rights on non-Untouchables. The Act penalises exclusion only 'on grounds of untouchability', not on grounds of caste or sectarian exclusiveness. It would be, as the high court points out, anomalous if Untouchables were given rights of entry more extensive than those enjoyed by their high-caste co-religionists. What, then, was the purpose and effect of including this expansive definition of Hinduism in the UOA? One of the judges in the Puranchand case attributes its presence to a desire to 'bring the Act in line' with the Explanation appended to Article 25(2)b and to preserve the distinctions between places of public worship belonging to different religions. Since the power saved to the state by Article 25(2)b is clearly confined to Hindus and Hindu institutions, the desire to provide against narrow construction of this power is readily understandable. But this does not account for the Explanation found in the UOA.

According to the high court in the Puranchand case, the sum effect of the Explanation is two-fold: first, to ensure that the exclusion of their respective co-religionists is

forbidden among Jains, Sikhs, Buddhists and sectarians as well as among Hindus in the narrower sense; second, to extend to Hindu Untouchables whatever rights caste Hindus might enjoy regarding entrance and worship at Jain, Buddhist, Sikh and sectarian shrines. But both of these objectives are accomplished by the wording of Section 3 itself; the Explanation, as interpreted, is not required for either purpose. For, first, the Act is not, on the face of it, limited to Hindus in either the narrow or broad sense.⁶ Its language would seem to cover exclusion on grounds of untouchability even when practised by those beyond the widest possible definition of Hinduism.⁷ And secondly, parity of rights in sectarian temples is accomplished without the Explanation, for the rights of entry are measured not by the sectarian character of the premises, but by the affiliation of those who use it.⁸

It appears, then, that the court has read the Explanation right out of the UOA. But the result would not be much different if it were taken in its most direct and plausible meaning—as lumping all of the named groups into the ‘same religion’. For the ‘same religion’ qualification is followed by the further requirement that the excluded persons belong to the same religious denomination or section thereof as those admitted. Even if all of the different faiths and sects mentioned in the Explanation are deemed to be the ‘same religion’ they would still remain distinct denominations or sections within it.⁹ And these denominational lines would set the boundary to the rights conferred by the UOA. In *State of Kerala vs Venkiteswara Prabhu*, Untouchables were prevented from entering the Nalambalam of a temple belonging to the Gowda Saraswat Brahmin community finding no evidence that persons other than members of this community ordinarily entered this part of the temple, the high court held that exclusion of Untouchables from it was not a violation of Section 3, since

those refused entrance did not belong to the same 'denomination or section thereof'. While enlarging the rights of Untouchables to a parity with other caste Hindus, the UOA did not increase the rights of the latter. Since members of other communities enjoyed no right of entry to this part of the temple, no such right was conferred on Untouchables.

The acceptance by the courts of denominational lines within Hinduism as limiting the operation of temple entry provisions may produce some unanticipated results.¹⁰ For the 'religion' and 'denomination' qualifiers also appear in other provisions of the UOA relating to; use of utensils and other articles kept in restaurants, hotels, etc.; use of wells, water sources, bathing ghats, cremation grounds; use of 'places used for a public or charitable purpose'; enjoyment of benefit of a charitable trust; and use of dharmasalas, sarais and musafirkhanas.¹¹ Given the reading of 'religion' and 'denomination' are generated by judicial solicitude for sectarian prerogatives, the rights granted by some of the central and crucial provisions of the UOA seem to be seriously limited'. There is thus a wide gap between the extent of the power conferred by Article 25(2)b, as interpreted by the Supreme Court in the Venkataramana Devaru case and the exercise of this power in the UOA, as interpreted by the high courts. The UOA, as interpreted, uses only part of the power conferred by the Constitution, for it recognises denominational and sectarian differences as limiting the extent of rights of entry. But the Constitution empowers the state to confer cross-denominational rights, to enter and use premises not only of the same religion or denomination but of *any* Hindu institution.

Aware of the denominational limitations of the UOA, and also troubled by the anomalous situation that while it is an offence to exclude Untouchables from temples classes of touchable Hindus could be excluded with impunity, several

states have enacted supplementary legislation.¹² A Bombay Act makes it an offence to prevent 'Hindus of any class or sect from entering or worshipping at a temple to the same extent and in the same manner as any other class or section of Hindus'.¹³ An Uttar Pradesh Act, inspired by judicial barriers to entry of Harijans at the Vishwanath temple in Benares, declares the rights of all sections of Hindus to offer worship at any Hindu temple.¹⁴ These laws apparently utilise the full ambit of the constitutional power regarding temples.¹⁵ They extend protection to non-Untouchables and they overcome the sectarian and denominational limitations which the courts read into the UOA. Although the states are limited in their power to legislate directly on untouchability (Galanter 1961a), this legislation will substantially broaden the rights of Untouchables as well. For the rights of the latter under the UOA are automatically elevated to a parity with the new rights which the state legislation confers on caste Hindus.

* * * * *

These problems in the Act are by no means insurmountable. As we have seen, the UOA demands constant inputs of judicial energy, sympathy, and inventiveness to resist the pull towards a weak, restrictive interpretation. It may be expected, however, that as the Act becomes older and consciousness of the evils that inspired it becomes less vivid, this pull will be even stronger....

PHENOMENOLOGY OF UNTOUCHABILITY*

SUNDAR SARUKKAI

Untouchability refers to certain practices of the ‘upper’ castes such as refusing to touch or share water with people who have been called the ‘Untouchables’ and who are today collectively called Dalits. These sets of practices involve not only proscriptions on both groups of people but are often justified through notions of purity and related concepts.¹

For many social commentators the practice of untouchability characterises Hindu civilisation. But what exactly constitutes this practice? While there have been tomes written on the sociology and politics of this practice, there is little of significance on the philosophical foundations of this practice. Such a philosophical reflection is made all the more urgent given the magnitude of the problem and its direct impact on modern Indian society.

... The philosophical engagement with touch seems to always require the notion of the Untouchable. In a sense then, the idea of the Untouchable is at the core of the ‘touchables’—not so surprisingly then, we find that untouchability is actually an essential marker of brahminhood. I will conclude by arguing that the displacement of this characteristic of untouchability from the Brahmins to the Untouchables illustrates not just the ‘outsourcing’ of untouchability but also a philosophical move of supplementation.[...]

TOUCH AS AN ACTION

Unlike other senses, touch is an action. Our standard response towards objects is that we automatically reach

towards them. But the untouchability experience conditions us to be more cautious towards touching in general. So the very act of touching becomes problematic because every act of touching becomes reflective. There is an important consequence of this: touching is no more an 'automatic' sense but becomes a judgement. In so doing, it gets modelled on vision. We know that in the case of vision we see objects on the one hand but we also see objects as something. 'Seeing as' is a reflective process associated with perception. In the phenomenology of untouchability, we see a similar move that makes touching a matter of judgement. So touching now becomes 'touching as'. Such a judgement is not about 'facts' alone; there is a moral code attached to it. This [is] how touch becomes a 'moral sense'.

As a consequence, every person is first of all potentially an Untouchable. Every act of touching is now imbued with this sense of doubt as to whether the objects of touch we reach towards could perhaps be an object of untouchability. This introduces the notion of *illusion in touch*. In the case of vision, a mirage is seen by the eye but its status as a mirage—as an image and not as a real object—is grounded in the lack of the possibility of touching a mirage. When I reach out to a mirage and try to grasp the object I see in the mirage I realise through the failure of the act of touching that the vision I see is actually a mirage. In the case of untouchability, an interesting reversal takes place: when I see an Untouchable I can see him but I do not reach out to him. I cannot use my sense of touch to validate the vision that I see. But I do not have the same kind of doubt that I have about a mirage. The Untouchable is real but through the denial of touch he is made into a mirage—this is the illusion of touch.

Thus, every touching is possible only if it first overcomes this potential untouchability. The primary sense that defines touch—particularly of humans—is not the capacity to touch but the potential of untouchability. This has

profound consequences on the creation of the narrative of the self as well as on action.

Finally, what distinguishes the phenomenological dimension of untouchability is the relation between *touching oneself* and *not touching another*.... Not touching another is actually a manifestation of the problem of touching oneself—this shift is precisely what makes untouchability in the Indian context unique. This is what differentiates it from other objects which are beyond the sense of touch. *That is, in the most essential sense untouchability is actually about the always present, potential untouchability not of another but of one-self.* This is most clearly manifested in the way the structure of untouchability unfolds in the Hindu practice.

THE INHERENT UNTOUCHABILITY OF BRAHMINS

It has been argued that untouchability is a characteristic of the brahmin community. Quigley, for example, emphasises this characteristic in order to support a different reading of caste. He notes that brahmins ‘can *be* Untouchables, and Untouchables, as ritual specialists, are priests’ (Quigley 1993: 16). His rereading of caste critiques Dumont’s observation that the hierarchy in the caste system occurs through the opposition of the pure and the impure. He finds Dumont’s characterisation of the opposition between spiritual authority (brahmins) and the temporal authority (of the kings), which leads to the essential disjunction between status and power, as not being empirically supported. Based on this, Dumont constructs brahmins and the Untouchables as extreme contrasts.

Quigley argues that the fact that the notion of impurity is very much a part of a brahmin priest implies that one cannot use the pure-impure axis, following Dumont, to posit contrasts between different castes. Firstly, Quigley points

out that there are at least six types of 'brahmin personae' such as the renouncer, spiritual preceptor, non-priest, a personal priest, temple priest and death priest (ibid.: 54). He then goes on to point out the various ways by which these brahmin priests become impure. He also points to the reaction of members of other communities who look down upon the brahmins, in terms of their impure status either in accepting gifts or 'who digest the sin, evil, and death of others' (ibid.: 80).

Quigley's attempt in his book is to make explicit the political dimensions involved in the creation of a hierarchy and in particular to emphasise the role of kingship in this act. His and other such similar attempts to rewrite the narrative of caste in India miss one essential point: an inquiry into the nature of untouchability.²

Ambedkar was aware of the enduring idea of the impure among brahmins and other castes but he clearly points out to the many differences. He notes that there is only a notion of temporal 'untouchability' in the case of brahmins and others who are in a state of impurity (Ambedkar 1948). There is no encoding of this state into one of a permanent stature. The acts of propitiation to get rid of the 'impure' state are not available to the Untouchables. To point out, the brahmins too had moments of untouchability cannot allow one to equate them with the Untouchables. Ambedkar conceptualises this difference in terms of the impure and the Untouchable. So, what Quigley calls as Untouchable in the case of brahmin priests, Ambedkar would call as the impure. Is there any merit to creating such a distinction? Ambedkar's distinction can be retained if we understand that *untouchability is not about impurity* as well as recognising that impurity is not untouchability. How do we make this distinction?

DAILY RITUALS

First of all, note that the notion of 'untouchability' among brahmins is not restricted only to priests in the act of accepting gifts or 'accepting' death of others. The rituals concerned with impurity begin with daily acts. There are many texts which describe elaborate rituals of purification starting from the time one gets out of bed. It is also the case that there are states of *madi* when the brahmin is 'Untouchable' to others and these states accrue even when not associated with impurity. Almost all the moments of auspicious worship, festivals, marriages, daily prayers have some rituals of *madi* associated with them.³

Madi is a characteristic of untouchableness. Certain rituals, which include most forms of prayers, have to be performed under this condition. A common ritual associated with *madi* is the following: the person who is doing a ritual must first of all wash his clothes and hang it to dry. Once it is dry it cannot be touched by any other person. The person who is 'in' *madi* cannot wear the clothes unless he or she has had a bath. If the cloth has to be moved, it is often done with the help of a stick. If anybody else or the *madi* person touches the dried cloth before s/he has had her bath, the cloth will have to be washed again.⁴ When a person is in *madi* nobody, including his own children, can touch him.⁵ What this means is that during family rituals family members are completely Untouchable till the ritual is completed.

Following Ambedkar, we can actually note the important distinctions in such states of 'untouchability' of the brahmins. While one can designate such an individual as being in a state of 'untouchability', the characteristics of untouchability are fundamentally different. First of all, the individual voluntarily takes on the mantle of untouchability. If we have to invoke the language of purity, then one can say that untouchability in this case is a mark of greater purity and not of greater impurity. Second, the fact that

such an individual takes it upon himself to be an 'Untouchable' means that he is the autonomous agent for such a decision. Moreover, in most cases, such an individual can come out of this state. Third, the punishment for transgression is not one that is similar to what is imposed on the involuntary Untouchables. The brahmin's 'untouchability' is that one does *not want* to be touched and is not that one is refused the touch. The touched-touching dichotomy which informs this position is one that is characteristic of touch. I agree with Ambedkar that these transient, voluntary states should not be equated with the notion of being an Untouchable.

However, we should note here another class of brahmins who are 'permanent untouchables' and these are the *Acharyas* (for example, in the Ramanuja tradition). These Acharyas are permanently Untouchable but since their untouchability is already inscribed within the notion of superior untouchability they retain this superior nature. Such Acharyas, for example, will not eat food which is cooked even by their wives. They too, like the Untouchables, gain their status of absolute untouchability through birth. The children (at least the eldest son) of Acharyas usually continue to be Acharyas. Even brahmins in a state of purity cannot touch these Acharyas, or watch them eat and so on. Untouchability for these people is not about attaining a state of untouchability and then coming out of it. It is hereditary, it is part of tradition and they are in a permanent state of being an Untouchable, even to their family and kin. Here, it is not about purity and impurity but about a *state of being*.⁶

BIPOLARITY AMONG UNTOUCHABLES

What should capture our attention is the bipolarity in those who are Untouchables. Agreeing with Ambedkar, we can distinguish those caste-individuals in moments of impurity

as being in a transient state and hence not being an Untouchable. But the special case of the Acharyas suggests something radically different. It is that the notion of being an Untouchable is an essential and necessary component of being a brahmin. To be a brahmin is to be an Untouchable, a permanent Untouchable. For most brahmins there are only moments of untouchability and they do not have the discipline or practice to reach this state of permanent untouchability. But for the most exalted spiritual leaders the moments of untouchability are permanent. In fact, being a permanent Untouchable, one that is passed on hereditarily, is what distinguishes these brahmin spiritual leaders.

Here is an intriguing paradox: what distinguishes the state of untouchability of these people in contrast to the Untouchables of Ambedkar? Untouchability in the former case is obviously a positive virtue whereas in the latter case it is a negative 'fact'. What is it in the nature of untouchability that allows this accretion of value? And what is it that resists the inversion so that the positive virtue becomes a characteristic of all Untouchables? While there may be useful social and political reasons that might explain this phenomenon, here I am interested in exploring the metaphysical consequences of the same.

The importance of the idea of the 'Untouchable' among the brahmins is indicative of the essentiality of this notion to the very definition of what is it to be a brahmin. A brahmin is not one who belongs to a particular community—this is merely the sociological interpretation of being a brahmin.⁷ [...]

It is well known that membership to a brahmin community is not through heredity alone. It is a necessary condition that one is born into a brahmin household but it is not sufficient. The sufficient condition that makes one into a brahmin is related to the idea of becoming an Untouchable.

Thus, I would like to suggest here that the most dominant marker of being a brahmin lies in the concept of untouchability, *lies in the potential of an individual to become an Untouchable*. How so? A brahmin is one who not only has access to temporal and potential untouchability but also to permanent, hereditary untouchability.

But then why is it that the brahmin's untouchability is valorised whereas the untouchability of the Untouchables transforms into most inhuman forms of treatment? The philosophical answer lies in the notion of supplementation, a concept that has been effectively used by Derrida in a completely different context.

UNTOUCHABILITY AND THE LOGIC OF THE SUPPLEMENT

Let me begin with the idea of a sign. A sign is that which stands for something else. Our access to the signified is mediated through the representation through signs. But the dominant metaphysics underlying this process gives a primacy to that which is signified, because of which the sign is always placed hierarchically lower than the signified.

Derrida engages with this idea through the analysis of writing (Derrida 1976). In western thought, writing has dominantly been seen to be derivative to speech, which itself is derivative to an originary thought, an essence or presence. Whether it is Rousseau's comment that writing is a 'dangerous supplement' to speech or a more virulent opinion that writing is evil, there is a continued tradition of suspicion towards writing. Derrida's critique of the binary of speech and writing where speech is seen to be 'superior' to writing leads him to suggest that writing does not act as a mere 'supplement' to speech. A supplement suggests that there is a lack in what is supplemented. But it cannot just be a mere representation of this lack or absence. What this

process of supplementation points to is the fact that the supplemented is incomplete and necessarily depends on the supplement. It is the supplement that brings to presence the signified. The consequence of this move is that the signified is not accessible to us other than through the presence of the signifiers—every signified therefore is a trace of the signifier.[...]

Even this brief entry into the idea of the supplement points to its potential use in understanding untouchability in the Indian context. The popular understanding of caste privileges the axial polarity between the brahmins and the Untouchables, also articulated along the pure-impure opposition. Like the speech/writing binary or man/woman, the brahmin/Untouchable binary is not only a constructed opposition but one in which the latter is inferiorised with respect to the former. This allows us to consider the possibility that the Untouchable acts as a supplement to the brahmin. It is moreover a 'dangerous supplement' and one that is intrinsically 'dangerous' to the signified, the brahmin. It moreover, to use one characterisation of Johnson's logic of the supplement, 'corrupts the purity of the brahmin. To use another characterisation, it 'protects against direct encounter with' the brahmins. The discourse of the Untouchable illustrates its construction as a supplement in these various descriptions.

Derrida's argument that the supplement is all that there is, that the supplement is to be found at the source, allows us to engage with the dominant discourse of untouchability in a different manner. The discourse on brahmins and untouchability clearly indicates that the notion of untouchability is seen as a supplement to the notion of a brahmin. However, the critical analysis of the supplement suggests that it is impossible to sustain untouchability as a 'mere' supplement. It, instead, is to be found in the source—the brahmin—itself. The example of the permanent Untouchable among brahmins is an added illustration of

the importance of the idea of untouchability among brahmins. To be the highest brahmin is to be an Untouchable but not of the kind that characterises the Untouchables. In other words, the necessity to construct a group called the Untouchables arises in large part due to the inherent presence of the notion of untouchability in the very idea of a brahmin.

What then are the implications of this argument? It is first and foremost the recognition that untouchability as a notion is intrinsic to brahmins. And this notion of untouchability is not about the rituals associated with impurity. It is actually about the characteristics of the non-temporal, permanent and hereditary characteristics of untouchability. The creation of a supplementary community of Untouchables is a necessary consequence of the inability of brahmins to attain the 'pure' state of Untouchable. But in creating this supplement the pure state of untouchability that characterises the Acharyas, for example, is converted into a negative virtue. In other words, the Untouchables are the supplemented Acharyas and this supplementation is needed for the possibility of having a community of brahmins whose members no longer carry the burden of 'pure untouchability'. Thus, if there were no creation of a supplemented class of Untouchables there is no possibility of having a community of brahmins. The Untouchables are the supplemented brahmins in the final analysis. In Derridean terms, the brahmins are like speech and the Untouchables are like writing. Ironically, the literal meaning of a brahmin is essentially related to speech and the Dalits have been essentially reduced to possessors of a body—the material substratum on which writing is possible. Speech is temporary, transitory and is evanescent—and is Untouchable! Writing is permanent, embodies the idea of 'hereditary'—and ironically, is touchable! The possibility of such reversals clearly illustrates the logic of supplementation. Thus, we can see how the critique of

speech suggests a way of critiquing the dichotomy between brahmins and Dalits.

PROCESS OF SUPPLEMENTATION

How exactly does this process of supplementation act to create a community of Untouchables as something necessary for the sustenance of the idea of a brahmin? This occurs through the creation of inverting the elements of the experience of touching. The supplementation occurs through the change from 'not wanting to be touched' to 'refusing to touch'. It is interesting that both these imperatives come from the brahmin—that is, the Untouchable brahmin is one who refuses to let others touch him and refuses to touch others. In the case of the Untouchables, neither is the case. I suggest that such a shift can happen only in the case of touch because of the touch-touched relation. It is in this sense that untouchability as we know it today arises in consequence of the metaphysics of touch and the supplementation of the shift from being touched to touching. And since touching is always an integral part of being touched they can only be in a reversible relation and not in a hierarchical relation thereby suggesting that the brahmins and the Untouchables actually exemplify a reversible relation between each other.

These are not just theoretical musings without empirical support! An interesting social phenomenon in Indian societies is the existence of communities who specialise in carrying various burdens of other communities. The professional mourners of Rajasthan are a community of women who do the job of mourning when somebody dies. This is one characterisation: these are women of a lower caste who are 'hired as professional mourners upon the death of upper caste males.... Their job is to publicly express grief of family members who are not permitted to

display emotion due to social status.’⁸ Quigley (1993) mentions the Mahabrahmins whose job is to carry the spirits of the dead. Indian society is filled with such examples of ‘outsourcing’. In another book where he relates kingship and untouchability, Quigley gives the example of brahmins who hug a dying king in order to take the king’s sin away (Quigley 2005: 130). Having absorbed the sins of the dying king, the embodied sinner leaves the kingdom never to return. This practice continues to this day; Quigley cites the example of the royal murders in Nepal a few years back when similar rituals were performed. In the case of the Untouchables, the untouchability of the brahmins is *outsourced* to the Dalits who then carry that burden. Recognising this move of supplementation is first of all a political recognition and enables specific political action.

Saying all this might not be saying much given the inhuman practices associated with untouchability. However, we should also remember that the deconstructive moves initiated through the analysis of the logic of supplementation have generated new and liberatory ideas which have been important in struggles against various types of hegemony. There is no reason that the same cannot happen in the case of the liberation of the Untouchables also. Such a phenomenology of untouchability also does something else: it allows us to develop an ethics which is based on touch. While ethical responses to untouchability often draw upon political ideas such as individual freedom there is a more foundational ethical response possible, one based on an ethics of touch.

HOW EGALITARIAN ARE
THE SOCIAL SCIENCES IN INDIA?*

GOPAL GURU

As fifty years' experience shows, Indian social science practice has harboured a cultural hierarchy dividing it into the vast, inferior mass of academics who pursue empirical social science and the privileged few who are considered the intellectually superior theoretical pundits with reflective capacity. To use a more familiar analogy, Indian social science represents a pernicious divide between theoretical Brahmins and empirical Shudras. This pernicious dichotomy indicates the lack of egalitarian conditions in social science practice in the country.

This essay is divided into four sections. The first section deals with the justification of the import of the egalitarian principle for critiquing the practice of social science including the cultural hierarchies that operate through certain academic and institutional structures. In the second section, an attempt is made to discuss the conditions that seem to adversely affect the growth of reflective capacity within intellectually deprived groups such as Dalits, tribals and even the Other Backward Classes (OBCs). In the third section, the argument is built around moral stamina as the necessary condition for doing theory. In the final section, an attempt is made to critique the theoretical claims that have been made on behalf of Dalits by non-Dalits. In other words, a moral critique of the intellectual representation of Dalit issues in social science is attempted.

EGALITARIAN PRINCIPLE AND SOCIAL SCIENCE PRACTICE

It is argued here that the egalitarian principle provides the moral opportunity and also the capacity to interrogate the exclusionary ('agrahara') nature of social science practice in the country. Second, it also provides normative direction to suggest alternative modes of re-organising the boundaries of social science so as to make them more inclusive. The egalitarian principle is both interrogatory and suggestive for the following reasons. First, the egalitarian principle brings out a sense of moral responsibility within practitioners of social science which forces them to offer a justification as to why s/he is talking in a particular social science language, say, of only theory. Thus egalitarianism interrogates all kinds of intellectual mores for their arbitrariness, including the hierarchical division which suggests that some are born with a theoretical spoon in their mouth and the vast majority with the empirical pot around their neck. (The earthen pot imagery has a grim history. During Peshwa rule in Pune Dalits were forced to hang earthen pots around their necks so that they could spit in it to avoid pollution.)

The egalitarian principle would also interrogate the epistemological imperialism that empowers non-Dalits/tribals to launch expeditions to conquer territories that belong to the Dalit/Adivasi intellectual universe. The egalitarian principle would puncture this modernist (over)confidence by questioning on moral grounds the competitive element which renders every field of knowledge as a free zone of investigation that can be taken over by anyone who follows the rules, procedures and protocols devised by the gatekeepers of social science. Thus the egalitarian principle undermines the competitive model of doing social sciences. It would put moral pressure on the modernist to keep off some fields of knowledge that might get better intellectual treatment from others. The

interrogatory character of the egalitarian principle fundamentally opposes all forms of exclusion from the field of intellectual inquiry.

The second aspect of egalitarian import into understanding social science practice in India is suggestive for the following reasons. It would not approve of arguments like 'one cannot demand equal treatment in all fields of intellectual pursuit'. Similarly, it would not approve of the intellectual position that some fields of inquiry must be left free for the specialists. The egalitarian principle would not approve of rigid ground rules, procedures and protocols which are restrictive in nature. Further, the egalitarian principle, at least at the theoretical level, offers a promise to those cultural groups whose entry into the intellectual field has been historically prohibited by social forces in India. For example, one of its epistemological variants can render the field of knowledge (both theoretical and practical, as epistemology of social action) communicable across cultural borders with persons of any cultural background in principle capable of utilising it. This kind of egalitarianism pre-supposes the possibility of a common stock of concepts and categories which are equally available for use and even misuse by persons from any caste or social origin. It only suggests that the epistemological field in itself does not establish a copyright of certain cultural groups to control categories. On the contrary, it would question the politics of naming categories or assigning boundaries to intellectual practice in an arbitrary manner. It is in this sense that the egalitarian principle promises to undermine the dominant epistemological practices which are not only exclusionary but also authoritarian in their intention and seek to discipline, denigrate and even deny epistemic status to concepts and categories that do not fall in line with the hegemonic cultural hierarchy. In other words, without the egalitarian principle, hegemonic social science practice

might make a lot of negative difference to cultural groups like Dalits and Adivasis. As an intellectual force this kind of hegemonic practice would caricature the Dalit/bahujans as epistemologically dumb, push them into empirical ghettos or confine their intellectual/theoretical ambitions to the dominant methodological modes. Thus, the lack of a genuine egalitarian principle within mainstream social science practice would crush the confidence of the marginalised (Dalits/Adivasis), lower their self-esteem and humiliate them through epistemological patronage or charity. In this context, it is necessary to ask the question whether we have followed the egalitarian principle in the practice of the social sciences? The answer to this question cannot be given in the affirmative.

Scholars have failed to address this question squarely. Instead they have lamented the falling standards of social science practice, particularly its theoretical components. Thus, it is suggested that there is poverty of political theory in India. While these are valid observations, they do not comment on the authoritative and intimidating character of social science practice in the country. What is ironical is that the lamentation has been about the shrinking social base of political theory in India, not so much about the content and form of theory. The authoritarian character did not attract scholarly attention even in the recent report on social science research in India. I argue that social science practice in India is still terribly exclusive, if not brahminical, and undemocratic in character. It is self-serving and self-satisfying as well, and lacks a genuine egalitarian character.

Social science discourse in India is being closely disciplined by self-appointed juries who sit in the apex court and decide what is the correct practice according to the canons. These juries decide what is theory and what is trash. It is a different matter that these canons lack authenticity as they are borrowed from the West

unreservedly. The apex court in social science with its full bench in Delhi keeps ruling out subaltern objections as absurd and idiosyncratic at worst, and emotional, descriptive-empirical and polemical at best. Consequently, most Dalit/bahujans have developed only stunted ambitions that are historically and socially structured. In other words, Dalits have not been able to develop the ambition for ideas and theory because of certain structural and socio-historical reasons that have provided an unprecedented advantage to the twice-born in this country.

II

SOCIAL CONTEXT OF INTELLECTUAL HIERARCHIES

Any discourse, including the social sciences, emerges within a specific material and social context that shapes reflective abilities among individuals or groups. What was the material context that would have prompted Dalits to go for experiment, innovation and imagination? Skilled occupations do facilitate a certain degree of the innovative element among their members. Generation of knowledge takes place basically in the labour process (Patil 1982: 17). It is the labour process that creates the concrete possibilities for such epistemological abilities. But reflective abilities develop only in certain kinds of labour processes that are imaginative, innovative and interesting so that they provide sufficient scope for the agent to reflect continuously on the tools of production. In India, social groups, particularly the artisan castes, who were forced if not privileged to handle labour processes with innovation could produce innovative knowledge systems. But certain groups like the Dalits failed to develop an intellectual capacity to reflect because, by and large, they were always kept out of such social contexts. Generation after generation, they were pushed into occupations that were completely devoid of any possibility of innovation and

imagination and hence were not impregnated with any possibility of knowledge. For example, they were pushed into scavenging, sanitation and other types of manual labour which had inherent limitations in prompting them to do anything extraordinary in terms of creating knowledge. Until the arrival of modernity in India, particularly with Independence, Dalits were not included in the differentiated spheres of production that offer the context for imagination. In other words, ghettoisation into inferiorised manual spheres, reflecting the closed character of society, resulted in loss of the confidence that is so important in developing the theoretical potential in the social sciences ... (Gellnar 1982: 182).

One of the crucial conditions of reflectivity is the availability of freedom. Freedom is necessary to seek detachment from the immediate for illumination at the general level. If one does not enjoy that freedom and is completely trapped in the ceaseless struggle for survival, one is completely handicapped in developing any reflectivity. Ultimately it is those with economic security who can pursue philosophy and theory in the formal sense of the terms. The rest are forced to do only the empirical side of social science. Also necessary are feedback from liberal interlocutors, support from institutions with strong traditions of solid theoretical research and financial support that would help the scholar to pursue the academic agenda at a more abstract level and on more meaningful and dignified terms. Members of the twice-born communities are fortunate to enjoy these conditions both in India and abroad. The Dalits lack these community resources.

III

HIERARCHICAL PAST SURVIVES IN THE CULTURAL

PRESENT

There are historical reasons that gave a structural advantage to the top echelons of 'the twice born' (henceforth abbreviated as TTB) in doing theory. Historically accumulated cultural inequalities seem to have reinforced Dalit epistemological closure. This in effect left the realm of reflectivity entirely free for the TTB. Such closure has its sanction in Manu's thinking. The shudras are born from the legs and hence are deficient in terms of the capacity to think. Manu's code denied Dalits and women access to formal education, which is necessary to achieve the capacity to speak in an abstract universal language.

The privileged location of the TTB was further legitimised through the writing of both Indian and foreign scholars. Prominent among them are P. V. Kane who argued that brahmins were the founders of Indian philosophy (Patil 1982). In the same vein, Louis Dumont also mentions (with reservations) that brahmins as the renouncers were the creators of different branches of knowledge (Dumont 1980: 275). Members of the TTB have consolidated their cumulative advantage over Dalit/bahujans for the following reasons. First, the TTB were fortunate to receive modern education from the imperialists. They were also the recipients of different kinds of fellowships that were showered on them by both several princely states and the colonial state. Even after Independence they received the attention and appreciation of the rulers. Many prominent brahmins led intellectual-cultural bodies in the state. They have been the major beneficiaries of intellectual opportunities that are available in India and abroad. Cambridge, Oxford, Harvard and several other universities abroad and privileged institutions and premier universities at home are monopolised by the TTB. The doors of certain premier institutions in the country like Nehru Memorial

Museum and Library (NMML) in Delhi, and Institute of Advanced Study in Shimla were completely closed to the Dalits. It is only in recent years that Dalits are accommodated in these institutions. There is no doubt that these institutions have promoted quality research, but their obsession with modernity undermined the egalitarian principle which, as seen earlier, requires equal access to intellectual resources. Dalits are the latecomers to such opportunities. They were excluded from the benefits as they could not pass the modernist test.

Dalits are thus denied the intellectual conditions that are necessary for developing more reflective capacities. On the other hand, there is a constant flow of opportunities to the TTB. The shudras have been, as remarked earlier, left with the earthen pot full of empirical details that are thoroughly despised by the TTB as inferior. The pot overflows in seminars and in magazines and government offices as and when it is required to overflow. Apart from the monopolisation of institutions to maintain the historical lead in epistemological status, the TTB deployed different strategies. For example, the high priests of theory seek to canonise social science discourse around ground rules that are often inhibiting, protocols that are discouraging, language that is frightening, and procedures that cause anxiety among those who want to move from the empirical to the theoretical. This kind of TTB professionalism strikes fear among the Dalits/bahujans who then do not dare to enter the theoretical 'agrahara'.

Language becomes another effective weapon to restrict the entry of Dalits into academic circles. Some of the more nasty guards of these circles would publicly point out the grammatical mistakes of the Dalits, not just for crushing their intellectual confidence through humiliation but also for hiding behind the language game. This restricted exchange ultimately leads to the creation of mutual admiration societies (Delhi is full of such societies). Such

societies certainly achieve a certain kind of height but hardly any depth in the social sciences. Due to their shared habitus they lack imagination to invent new conceptual instruments. Thus, they keep producing more of the same.

The strict observance of a language code, protocols, body language and ground rules effectively converts seminar halls into a hostile structure that very often inflict humiliation on the Dalits who then feel nervous or intimidated to enter such structures. Ultimately, Dalits are denied access to knowledge and its articulation. They are also denied the critical faculty to interrogate the dominant mode of thinking. For example, the Dalit may have a genuinely insightful point that might challenge the big boss in social science, but the moment the Dalit questions the premise of the big boss, immediately loud laughter full of crushing derision is collectively produced in such gatherings. Does not this kind of institutionalised exclusion dent the confidence of social science?

However, the high priests of theory do not mind Dalits doing empirical studies. Some of them base their theoretical premises on data collected by Dalits. Social science practice therefore lacks moral standing. Theory does not attract the Dalit also because the latter lack internal moral reasoning based on the notion of sacrifice and endurance. Doing theory is a moral responsibility based on sacrifice that the Dalits have to make in terms of pursuing spiritual rather than temporal power. It requires that one be not moved by immediate success or glamour or charm.

IV

MORAL CONDITIONS OF REFLECTIVE CAPACITIES

Doing theory demands enduring moral stamina for successfully resisting the temptation for temporal gains that can de-motivate a person from pursuing the

theoretical. Doing serious theory also demands that one should overcome the sense of anxiety that involves an element of compulsion to perform. Performance, whether on the stage or in seminar rooms, is aimed at getting immediate recognition from the audience. In such performances what becomes important is body language, speech and sound and speed of words and not so much the careful arrangement of content. Doing theory requires discipline, patience and endurance that go into making a careful theoretical statement that is not superficial or polemical. Doing theory does not therefore bring immediate recognition. Against this, the temporal fetches immediate recognition.

Most Dalits are vulnerable to the attraction of temporal power that does not flow from theoretical practice but from what are considered to be the more glamorous and easy spheres of mobility. This might include formal politics and networking with institutions that demand that intellectuals always be ready with data. When ambitions for the temporal grow out of proportion to the theoretical consciousness, then theoretical concerns get completely driven out from the cognitive map of the Dalits. Practical reason takes precedence over theoretical reason. Along with the state, Dalit politicians from both the non-governmental organisation (NGO) sector and formal politics promote such practical reason because in the case of the former the empirical details come in handy to impress donor agencies, while in the case of the latter the data help in constructing the self-serving rhetoric that serves very well the everyday forms of Dalit petty politics. Like the figures of atrocities are converted into such rhetoric and later are parroted by Dalits in national and international forums. One can mix some emotion to make the details more interesting.

In such an intellectual atmosphere, promoting theory requires transcending emotions and is considered a big

risk. Anybody offering theory looks like a stranger to this brand of Dalits who have a stake in maintaining their collective theoretical inability. The logic of the temporal dominates the academic agenda of the Dalits. Thus, many of them go in for soft options rather than tough courses like philosophy and theory that do not promise temporal power. It is this professionalisation of Dalit interest that makes them more individualistic in their attitude and is responsible for their casualness if not callousness towards doing theory. Dalits try to compensate for theoretical deficiency by doing brilliant poetry....

But poetry cannot be a substitute for theory. But poetry does not have the conceptual capacity or the dialectical power to universalise the particular and particularise the universal. Theory demands clarity of concepts and principles and the open examination of one's own action to see whether it is justified. Poetry helps the Dalit in making connections through metaphors, but not through concepts. It is theory that makes connections through concepts and also helps in illuminating the meaning that is embedded in complex reality.

However, it is not entirely true that Dalits turn towards either poetry or empirical research out of compulsion. They also make a very conscious choice for doing empirical research for several reasons. They would argue that their lived experience is rich enough and can stand on its own authentic terms so that it does not require any theoretical representation. Experience for them is a sufficient condition for organising their thought and action and for ignition of everyday experience into resistance. Second, Dalits argue that since they have privileged access to reality they can capture it without any theoretical representation. This claim is obviously based on ontological blindness. The assumption in such a claim is that non-Dalits have an innate inability to comprehend Dalit reality because of their different social location. Thus, though

Dalits do not generate any theory, their research can always contain some valuable theoretical insights, their experience alone can illuminate aspects of human relations. Third, in defence of empiricism some of the Dalits still argue that doing theory is undesirable because it makes a person intellectually arrogant, egoistic and socially alienated if not irrelevant. In this regard it is interesting to note that the critique of abstract thinking goes back to the fourteenth-century in Maharashtra. The forerunner of the non-brahmin tradition, Sant Tukaram, criticises this intellectual tradition for its egoistic implication in the following 'abhanga' (form of folk or devotional poetry):

It is all to the good! O God! That you made me
kunbi Otherwise I would have been done to death
through Brahminical cant and hypocrisy.
As a Brahmin, I would have floated full of arrogance
and ego
And would have been led to the lowest of the lowest
Naraka (hell). (More 1999)

These are some of the reasons that are advanced by the Dalits to defend their empiricism. The question that still remains to be answered is should the Dalits, tribals and the OBCs be forever lost in their unique experience? Should they not look at theory as a moral responsibility to accord respectability to their experience that otherwise is caricatured by the snobbish TTB theorists and politicians? Should they not stop making guest appearances in somebody else's formulations and restore to themselves the agency to reflect organically on their own experience?

V

DALITS NEED THEORY AS A SOCIAL NECESSITY

Moving away from the empirical to the theoretical mode has become a social necessity for Dalits, tribals and OBCs for many reasons. First, they need theory to confront the reverse orientalism that treats Dalits, tribals and OBCs as the inferior empirical self and the TTB as the superior theoretical self. The descriptive mode is often deployed by the TTB in order to gift-wrap the insult and derision that is inflicted on the Dalits. Thus description of the body language of the Dalits and the OBCs becomes an erotic need for the cultural and political satisfaction of the TTB. It is due to this reason that the TTB did not find it necessary to offer theoretical treatment to the theatrical language of an OBC or Dalit chief minister from Bihar or Uttar Pradesh. The theory of theatrical language offers a unique opportunity for Dalit/bahujan scholars to fight this derisive description of cultural symbols. It is in this sense that doing theory becomes a social necessity in order to fight reverse orientalism and become the subject of their own thinking rather than becoming the object of somebody else's thinking. To put it more crudely, the asymmetrical relationship that characterises reverse orientalism seeks to caricature Dalits, tribals and OBCs as amusing objects. This kind of social science practice raises the issue whether social science in India is not reproducing the same tormenting forms of orientalism against which it had fought in the first instance? In what way are the practitioners of social sciences morally superior to the orientalists?

In view of the complete lack of theoretical intervention from Dalit/bahujan scholars, some non-Dalits messiahs have offered to represent Dalit/bahujans theoretically. Their claim to fight this reverse orientalism on behalf of Dalits looks attractive. It is argued by the TTB that they need to intervene in the Dalit situation at the theoretical level only to restore voice and visibility to Dalits and ultimately advance the Dalit epistemological cause. But this also ends up producing reverse orientalism in a very subtle way. The

claim to offer epistemological empowerment to Dalits involves a charity element which by definition is condescending. This epistemological charity has several implications for Dalits. Speaking for Dalits or anybody constitutes a jajmani relationship invoking the patron and the client. In the present case, the 'mooknayak' becomes the patron and the 'dumb' becomes the client to define the patron. The patron, in a very ironical sense, tends to reproduce the brahminical mechanism of first controlling knowledge resources and then pouring them into the empty cupped palms of Dalits. It happens in the same humiliating way—the TTB still pour water into the hands of the thirsty Dalits. This structured relationship creates legitimacy for the patrons' existence in both the Dalit soul and Dalit society. As a result the patron does not find it necessary to exit from the epistemological fields that are specific to the Dalit and bahujan situation.

This jajmani relationship also tends to undervalue or underplay the discursive capacity of such groups who, in more favourable hermeneutic conditions, could develop their own epistemic stamina. But the 'muknayaks' make a very smart move, prompting the dumb to keep supplying more interesting details which the former then uses for either grand formulation in a liberal mode or its postmodernist de-construction. This by implication contains the Dalits within the empirical and pushes them into the frozen essentialist trap. This postmodernist construction of Dalits remains blind to the hegemonic politics that suppresses the need to make connections between several local experiences that belong to the same logical class of collective suffering and exploitation.

Finally, this epistemological enthusiasm of the non-Dalits suffers from another rather serious malady. This intellectual representation remains epistemologically posterior. That is to say, the discovery of the Dalit epistemological standpoint fails to explain who has arrived

—whether the object (Dalits) or the subject (‘mooknayaks’). This question becomes absolutely crucial because such claims have been sustained on the basis of throwing up completely new conceptual landscapes from the Dalit *experience*. This inability to either recover or throw up an alternative *concept* happens because these scholars choose to theorise Dalit experience standing outside the Dalit experience. This representation thus remains epistemologically posterior—its standpoint remains a mere assertion which feeds on the critique of the mainstream Marxist or feminist framework. This externality hardly enables the Dalits to secure theoretical advance for their own revolutionary understanding and politics. To put it more crudely, such epistemological enthusiasms may turn Dalit epistemology into an exegetical horizon of difference that radically undermines any possibility of the fusion of epistemologies that are egalitarian in nature. It is in this sense that the patronising or posterior epistemology fails to belong to the realm of social necessity. It comes up as a choice to transcend the personal intellectual frustration of those middle class ex-radicals for whom the old frameworks have ceased to be charming options.

It is true that the old liberal or Marxist discourses tried to tighten the conceptual boundaries of social sciences in India, almost pushing the social science discipline into a state of suffocation. But these discourses did compete with one another, like the caste discourse vs class discourse for deciding protocols, procedure and ground rules for the social sciences. In the process these discourses took over the theoretical task of discovering concepts and categories for Dalits, Adivasis and OBCs and women. For example, the Marxist discourse introduced concepts like class, exploitation, proletariat, labour and alienation for everybody including Dalits. In the liberal discourse caste, nationalism, citizenship and rights and multiculturalism are the potent categories for everybody. This by implication

suggests the Dalit failure of historical imagination to do theory. Although such rendering does pose a huge theoretical challenge to provide alternative sets of categories, this is a challenge that is worth taking. Dalit theory in order to become a social necessity has to be vertically critical of the limitations of Marxist and liberal methods and horizontally sensitive towards those Dalit/bahujan critical impulses which may be still present in these methods. Thus, it would be unfair to dispense with everything from Marxism or liberalism for their epistemological deficiencies.

VI

DALITS NEED THEORY AS INNER NECESSITY

In fact doing theory is also an inner necessity for the Dalits. There seem to be different factors that become the moral pre-conditions for the realisation of this inner necessity. For Dalits to realise doing theory as an inner necessity, they must make a conscious moral choice to use their sense of freedom for understanding and reflecting on the Dalit experience. They should treat this freedom to walk out from the Dalit experience as the initial condition for achieving theoretical heights in their reflections. They may go to Oxford and Cambridge for achieving height to their experience, they should also make a moral choice to walk back into the Dalit experience in order to accord depth to their reflections. This becomes an essential condition for doing theory. Thus, the modernist theorist who is driven by individualised intellectual triumphalism of conquering newer epistemological territories becomes a morally undesirable option for the Dalits. This kind of epistemological imperialism is one-sided as it shows commitment to scholarship and not to the cause. For Dalits, theory comes as a double commitment both to scholarship and also to the social cause. As a part of this moral

commitment the Dalits should avoid walking into pure empiricism or experientialism which come as alternatives in the competitive forms of tokenism in the realms of both academics and politics. Thus, for Dalits, theory should not begin and end with Oxford or Cambridge or the Shimla institute or the NMML. Their theory should not be caught in the self-serving professionalism and stupefaction adopted by the TTB in the country. Dalits should test the tenacity of their theory not with the certification of juries of social sciences, howsoever attractive that may be, but on the basis of how much influence these theoretical formulations enjoy in the popular mentality.

It is a Gramscian project that demands impeccable commitment on the part of the theorist to translate technical content into an ordinary idiom and common speech so that it becomes accessible to the common people and does not remain confined to seminar rooms only. Dalits are expected to take the moral lead in doing theory in the country. This orientation would thus remove the cultural hierarchies that tend to divide social science practice into theoretical brahmins and empirical shudras. Ultimately social science in India would fulfill the fondest hopes by expanding the social base of its conceptual landscape.

SECTION

II

Caste and Class

SECULARISATION OF CASTE AND THE MAKING OF
THE NEW MIDDLE CLASS*

D. L. SHETH

On the whole, the discourse on caste in post-independent India remained bogged down in the dichotomous debate on 'tradition' verses 'modernity' and 'caste' versus 'class'. The dichotomous view of change has prevented scholars, policy-makers and political activists alike, from taking a view of the process by which caste has changed and a new type of stratificatory system has emerged. This process, which can broadly be characterised as secularisation of caste, has detached caste from the ritual status hierarchy on the one hand, and has imparted to it a character of the power-group functioning in the competitive democratic politics on the other. Changes in caste could thus be observed along these two dimensions of secularisation: de-ritualisation and politicisation. These changes have: (a) pushed caste out of the traditional stratificatory system, (b) linked it to the new structure of representational power, and (c) in their cumulative impact they have made it possible for individual members of different castes to acquire new economic interests and social-political identification and own class-like as well as ethnic-type identities. Thus, secularisation of caste, brought about through its de-ritualisation and politicisation, has opened up a third course of change. For lack of a more appropriate term I call it classisation. In the following sections, I shall describe these three processes of change in caste and their implications for the emergence of a new type of stratificatory system in India.

DE-RITUALISATION

Caste has been conventionally conceived as an insulated system of ritual status hierarchy, embedded in the 'perennial' religious culture of India. Rituality (i.e., rootedness of caste behaviour and organisation in the religious ideology and practices) thus constituted the core of the whole system of castes. It enabled caste to maintain autonomy and stability of status-hierarchy in the face of changes, both economic and political, that occur in the wider society. In this perspective, caste 'accommodated' these changes only to the extent that the system could absorb them without losing its structural and cultural integrity. In responding to these changes caste was seen to have found 'new fields of activity' and assumed new functions, but all this to retain its basic structure and ideological (religious) core. The insularity of the caste system is thus guaranteed, because it is bounded by certain ideological and structural contexts—each articulating a form of rituality. More specifically, these contexts pertain to: (a) the religious ideology of purity and pollution; (b) the religiously sanctioned techno-economic and political organisation of the village, especially its food production and distribution system; (c) customs and traditions of castes evolved over centuries. Caste not only survived but grew in these contexts and acquired its systemic character; they constituted its 'support system' of the ritual hierarchy.

In what follows, I argue that the changes that have occurred in Indian society, especially after India's de-colonisation, have led to de-ritualisation of caste—meaning de-linking of caste from various forms of rituality which bound it to a fixed status, an occupation and to specific rules of commensality and endogamy. I further argue that with the erosion of rituality, a large part of the 'support system' of caste has collapsed. Uprooted from its ritually determined ideological, economic and political contexts it

has ceased to be a unit of the ritual-status hierarchy. Caste now survives as a kinship-based cultural community, but operates in a different, newly emergent system of social stratification.

Modernisation of India's economy and democratisation of its political institutions have released new economic and political power in the society. The hierarchically ordered strata of castes now function as horizontal groups, competing for power and control over resources in society. Alongside this change in the organisational structure, i.e. its horizontalisation, the form consciousness takes has also changed. That of members belonging to a caste is expressed more in the nature of community consciousness, rather than in hierarchical terms. Caste consciousness is now articulated as political consciousness of groups staking claims to power and to new places in the changed opportunity structure. It is a different kind of collective consciousness from that of belonging to a 'high' or 'low' ritual status-group. The rise of such consciousness of castes has led to disruption of hierarchical relations and to increase in competition and conflict among them. Far from strengthening the caste system, the emergent competitive character of 'caste consciousness' has contributed to its systemic disintegration. The disintegrating system of traditional statuses is now thickly overlaid by the new power system created by elections, political parties and above all by social policies of the state—such as that of affirmative action.

Fundamental changes have occurred in the occupational structure of the society. A vast number of non-traditional, unbound-to-caste occupations and a new type of social relations among occupational groups have emerged. This has resulted in breaking down the nexus between hereditary, ritual status and occupation—one of the caste-system's defining features. It is no longer necessary to justify status of one's occupation in terms of its correlation

with the degree of ritual purity or impurity associated with it. The traditional, ritualistic idea of cleanliness or otherwise of the occupation one follows has become unimportant; the crucial consideration is what brings a good income to the individual. A Brahman dealing in leather or an ex-Untouchable dealing in diamonds is no longer looked upon as a socially deviant behaviour. That the former is a more frequent occurrence than the latter has only to do with the resources at one's command and not with observance of ritual prohibitions attached to the statuses involved. More importantly, the cleanliness or otherwise of an occupation is increasingly seen in a physical and biological sense rather than in ritual or moral terms (Desai 1984).

Significant structural differentiations have taken place within every caste. Traditionally, an individual caste bounded by rituals and customs, functioned internally as a truly egalitarian community, both in terms of rights and obligations of members vis-a-vis each other and of lifestyles, i.e. the food they ate, the clothes they wore, the houses they lived in, etc. Differences in wealth and status (of clans) that existed among households within the same caste were expressed, often apologetically, on such occasions as weddings and funerals but rarely in power terms vis-a-vis other members of the caste. Today, households within a single caste have not only been greatly differentiated in terms of their occupations, educational and income levels and lifestyles but these differences have led them to align outside the caste, with different socio-economic networks and groupings in the society—categories which cannot be identified in terms of the caste system.

The caste rules of commensality (i.e. restrictions about accepting cooked food from members of other castes) have become almost totally inoperative outside one's household. Even within the household, observance of such rules has

become quite relaxed. In 'caste dinners', for example, friends and well-wishers of the host, belonging to both the ritually lower as well as higher strata than that of the host are invited and are seated, fed and served together with the members of the caste hosting the dinner. The caste panchayats, where they exist, show increasingly less concern to invoke any sanctions in such situations.

The castes which occupied a similar ritual status in the traditional hierarchy, but were divided among themselves into sub-castes and sub-sub-castes by rules of endogamy, are now reaching out increasingly into larger endogamous circles, in some cases their boundaries co-terminate with those of the respective *varna* in a region to which they supposedly belong. More importantly, intercaste marriages across different ritual strata, often even crossing the self-acknowledged *varna* boundaries, are no longer uncommon. Such marriage alliances are frequently made by matching education, profession and wealth of brides and grooms and/or their parents, ignoring traditional differences in ritual status among them. Significantly, such intercaste marriages are often arranged by the parents or approved by them when arranged by the prospective spouses on their own. The only 'traditional' consideration that enters into such cases is the vegetarian-meat-eating divide which is also becoming quite fuzzy. Although statistically the incidence of such intercaste marriages may not be significant, the trend they represent is. A more important point is that the mechanisms through which castes enforced rules of endogamy have weakened in many castes. [...]

In this process many a caste has structurally severed its relationship from the system of ritual obligations and rights which once governed its economic and social existence and gave it an identity in terms of its status in the ritual hierarchy. Intercaste relations in the village today operate in a more simplified form, as between castes of

landholders/operators and those of the landless labour. This relationship between them is often articulated in terms of political consciousness of two groups of castes representing different economic interests in the changed political economy of the village.

The socio-religious content of economic relationships in the village has thus largely disappeared; they have become more contractual and almost totally monetised. The traditional jajmani relationships, which regulated economic transactions between castes in social-ritual terms, have been replaced by relationships of employer and employee, of capital and wage labour. When the traditional social and religious aspects of economic relationships are insisted upon by any caste, such as traditional obligations of one status group to another, it often leads to intercaste conflicts and violence in the villages. In brief, the pattern of social relations sustained by the internal system of food production of a village and by conformity of status groups to their religiously assigned roles in the system and to norms defining the roles, has virtually disintegrated.

In sum, while castes survive as micro-communities based on kinship sentiments and relationships, they no longer relate to each other as 'units' of a ritual hierarchy. The caste system, for long conceived as a ritual status system, has imploded. Having failed to cope with the changes that have occurred in the larger society, particularly after India's de-colonisation, the caste 'system' is unable to maintain itself on the basis of its own principle of ritual hierarchy. It cannot sustain vertical linkages of interdependence and co-operation among its constituent units, nor can it enforce its own rules governing obligations and privileges of castes vis-a-vis each other.

In a few specific contexts where ritual relationships between castes still survive, they have acquired contractual, often conflictual, forms negating the system's hierarchical aspect. Ritual roles which members of some

castes (e.g., the role of a priest or a barber) still perform have been reduced to those of functionaries called upon to do a job for payment on specific occasions (weddings, deaths, etc.). Performance of such roles/functions by a few members of a caste, however, has no relevance for determining its place in the changed stratificatory system. But such phenomenal changes have occurred in Hinduism itself in recent years that intercaste relations can no longer be viewed as constitutive of a ritually determined religious practice. The growth in popularity of new sects, deities and shrines; the growing importance of gurus and godmen; and the new practice of public celebration of Hindu religious festivals on a much wider social and geographical scale, have all shored up popular-cultural and political aspects of Hinduism. This has considerably weakened the traditional ritual and social organisational aspects of Hinduism, and intercaste relations have lost their systemic religious context. Castes, now negotiate their status claims in the newly emergent stratificatory system.

Larger social-political formations have emerged in India's changing stratificatory system. Each such formation grew in the process of politicisation of castes and has acquired a new form of collective consciousness that is not like that of a ritual-status group nor a 'class' in a polarised class structure. This consciousness is based on a perception of common political interest and modern status aspirations on the part of members of these new formations. In this process, the unitary consciousness of individual castes has become diffused into an expanded consciousness of belonging to a larger social-political formation, which cannot be described as a 'caste' or 'class'.

POLITICISATION OF CASTES

[...]Put simply, competitive politics after Independence required that a political party seeking wider electoral bases

view castes neither as a pure category of 'interest' nor of 'identity'. The involvement of castes in politics fused 'interest' and 'identity' in such a manner that a number of castes could share common interests and identity in the form of larger social-political conglomerates. The process was of politicisation of castes, which by incorporating castes in competitive politics re-organised and recast the elements of both hierarchy and separation among castes in larger social collectivities (Kothari 1970: 3-25.) These new collectivities did not resemble the varna categories or anything like a polarised class-structure in politics. The singular impact of competitive democratic politics on the caste system thus was that it de-legitimised the old hierarchical relations among castes, facilitating new, horizontal power relations among them.

The process of politicisation of castes acquired a great deal of sophistication in the politics of the Congress Party.... By relying on the caste calculus for its electoral politics and, at the same time, articulating political issues in terms of economic development and national integration, the Congress was able to evolve durable electoral bases across castes and to maintain its image as the only truly national party. This winning combination of 'caste politics' and 'nationalist ideology' secured for the Congress Party a dominant position in Indian politics for nearly three decades after Independence (Kothari 1964, 1989: 36-58.) [...]

The Congress Party projected its politics at the national level as representing 'national aspirations' of the Indian people. At the regional levels, the party consolidated its social base by endorsing the power of the numerically strong and upwardly mobile dominant, but traditionally of lower status, castes of landowning peasants, e.g. Marathas, Reddys, Patidars, Jats and so on. In the process, it created patron-client type of relationships in electoral politics, relationships of unequal but reliable exchanges between

political patrons—the upper and dominant (intermediate) castes—and the numerous ‘client’ castes at the bottom of the pile, popularly known as the Congress’ ‘vote-banks’. This ensured for the Congress a political consensus across castes, despite the fact that it was presided over by a small upper-caste, English-educated elite in collaboration with the regional social elites belonging by and large to the upwardly mobile castes of landed peasants. The ‘national elite’, with the self-image of modernisers, often viewed the latter as parochial traditionalists. Still the alliance held.

This collaboration between the two types of elites created a new structure of representational power in the society, around which grew a small middle class. This class constituted of the upper-caste national elite living in urban areas and the rural social elite belonging to the dominant peasant castes as well as those upper-caste members living in rural areas. The ruling national elites, although they belonged to the upper *dwija* castes, had become detached from their traditional ritual status and functions. They had acquired new interests in the changed (planned) economy, and lifestyles which came through modern education, non-traditional occupations, and a degree of westernisation which accompanied this process. The dominant castes of the regional elites, still depended more on Sanskritisation than on ‘westernisation’ in their pursuit of upward social mobility. But they encouraged their new generations to take to modern, English-medium education and to new professions. In the process, despite their Shudra origins, but thanks to their acquisition of new power in the changed rural economy and politics, several peasant communities succeeded in claiming social status equivalent to the middle class *dwijas*.

Consequently, such communities as patidars, marathas, reddyas, kammias, and their analogues in different regions were identified with ‘upper castes’, and not with ‘backward castes’. Acquisition of modern education and interest in the

new (planned) economy enabled them, like the dwija upper castes, to claim for themselves a new social status and identity, i.e. that of the middle class.

At the same time, the caste identities of both these sections of the 'middle class' were far from dissolved. They could comfortably own both the upper-caste status and the middle-class identity as both categories had become concomitant with each other. While the alliance between the upper-caste national elite and the dominant caste regional elites remained tenuous in politics, they together continued to function as a new power-group in the larger society. In the formation and functioning of this middle class as a power group of elite, caste had indeed fused with class and status dimension had acquired a pronounced power dimension. But insofar as this process of converting traditional status into new power was restricted only to the upper rungs in the ritual hierarchy, they sought to use that power in establishing their own caste-like hegemony over the rest of the society. It is this nexus between the upper traditional status and new power that inhibited the transformative potentials of both modernisation and democracy in India.

This conflation of the traditional status system with the new power system, however, worked quite differently for the numerous non-dwija lower castes. In negotiating their way into the new power-system, their traditional low status, contrary to what it did for the upper and the intermediate castes, worked as a liability. The functions attached to their very low traditional statuses had lost relevance or were devalued in the modern occupational system. Moreover, since formal education was not mandated for them in the traditional status system, they were slow to take to modern education when compared with the upper castes. Nor did they have the advantage of inherited wealth as their traditional status had tied them to subsistence livelihood patterns of the jajmani system.

In brief, for the lower castes of small and marginal peasants, artisans, the ex-untouchables and the numerous tribal communities, their low status in the traditional hierarchy worked negatively for their entry in the modern sector. Whatever social capital and economic security they had in the traditional status system was wiped out through the modernisation process; they no longer enjoyed the protection that they had in the traditional status system against the arbitrary use of hierarchical power by the upper castes. On top of that they had no means or resources to enter the modern sector in any significant way, except becoming its underclass. They remained at the bottom rung of both the hierarchies, the sacred and the secular, of caste and class.

This did objectively create an elite-mass kind of division in politics, but it still did not produce any awareness of polarisation of socio-economic classes in the society. In any event, it did not create any space for class-based politics. In fact, all attempts of the left parties at political mobilisation of the numerous lower castes as a class of proletarians did not achieve any significant results either for their electoral or revolutionary politics. Neither did their politics, focused as it was on class ideology, make much of a dent on Congress-dominated politics marked by the rhetoric of national integration and social harmony. In effect, the Congress could establish the political hegemony of the upper caste oriented-middle class with the electoral consent of the lower castes! A very peculiar caste-class linkage was thus forged in which the upper castes functioned in politics with the self-identity of a class (ruling or 'middle') and the lower castes, despite their class-like political aspirations, with the consciousness of their separate caste identities. The latter were linked to the former in a vertical system of political exchange through the Congress Party, rather than horizontally with one another.

POLITICS OF RESERVATIONS

It took some three decades after Independence for the lower castes of peasants, artisans, the ex-untouchables and the tribals to express their resentment about the patron-client relationship that had politically bound them to the Congress Party. With a growing awareness of their numerical strength and the role it could play in achieving their share in political power, their resentment took the form of political action and movements.[...]

It was around mid-1970s that the upper-caste hegemony over national politics began to be seriously challenged. This was largely due to the social policies of the state, particularly that of reservations (affirmative action).[...]

However, the process of politicisation of castes came to a head at the beginning of the 1980s. This was when the Second Commission for Backward Classes (the Mandal Commission) proposed to extend reservations in jobs and educational seats to the other backward classes (i.e. to castes of lower peasantry and artisans) in all states and union territories and at the central government level. This proposal was stoutly opposed by sections of the upper and the intermediate castes who by then were largely ensconced in the middle-class. They saw the newly politicised lower castes forcing their way into the middle class (particularly into white-collar jobs), that too not through open competition but on 'caste-based' reservations. This created a confrontation of interest between the upper and intermediate castes on the one hand and the lower castes on the other. But, it led to a resurgence of lower castes in national politics. This resurgent politics, guided by lower caste aspirations to enter the middle class, was pejoratively derided as the 'Mandalisation of politics' by the English-educated elite. This euphemism for the politicisation of lower castes has

since radically altered the social bases of politics in India. [...]

In sum, the state policy of affirmative action gave a big impetus to the process of politicisation of castes (as well as to de-ritualisation of intercaste relations).[...] What politicisation of castes has thus done, along with the spread of urbanisation and industrialisation, is to have contributed to the emergence of a new type of stratificatory system in which the old middle class has not only expanded in numbers, but has begun to acquire new social and political characteristics.

CLASSISATION OF CASTE

‘Classisation’ is a problematic, and admittedly an inelegant, concept used for describing certain types of changes in caste. As a category derived from conventional class analysis, it articulates the issue of change in linear and dichotomous terms, i.e. how (rather ‘why not’) is caste transforming itself into a polarised structure of economic classes? [...]

Classisation neither follows a linear, teleological course of change nor does it represent the caste-system’s own reproductive process. I, therefore, view classisation as a two-fold process: (a) releasing of individual members of all castes (which may vary in extent across castes) from the religiously sanctioned techno-economic and social organisation (i.e. occupational and status hierarchy) of the village system; (b) and linking of their interests and identities to organisations and categories relevant to urban-industrial system and modern politics. This process operates not only in urban areas, but also increasingly in the rural areas. The two aspects of the process are not temporally sequential, nor spatially separated. They criss-cross, and the changes become visible in the form of elements of the newly emergent, macro-system of social

stratification. Thus viewed, classisation is a process by which castes, but more frequently their individual members, relate to categories of social stratification of a type different from that of caste.[...]

The quest today is not for registering higher ritual status; it is universally for wealth, political power and modern (consumerist) lifestyles. In short, caste has ceased to 'reproduce' itself, as it did in the past.

EMERGENCE OF A NEW MIDDLE CLASS

All these changes have imparted a structural substantiality to the macro-stratificatory system of a kind it did not have in the past. In the absence of a centralised polity, the system functioned super-structurally as an ideology of varna hierarchy. Lacking structural substance, it served as a 'common social language' and supplied normative categories of legitimation of statuses to various local, substantive hierarchies of jatis (Srinivas 1962; Béteille 1996). But after India became a pan-Indian political entity governed by a liberal democratic state, as we saw earlier, new social formations—each comprising a number of jatis, often across ritual hierarchies and religious communities—emerged at the regional and all-India levels. Deriving its nomenclature from the official classification devised by the state in the course of implementing its policy of affirmative action (reservations), the new formations began to be identified as: the forward or the 'upper castes', the backward castes, the Dalits or Scheduled Castes (SCs) and the tribals or the Scheduled Tribes (STs).

Unlike status groups of the caste system, the new social formations function as relatively loose and open-ended entities, competing with each other for political power. In this competition, members of the upper-caste formation have available to them the resources of their erstwhile traditional higher status and those of lower-caste

formations have the advantages accruing to them from the state's policy of affirmative action. Thus, the emergent stratificatory system represents a kind of fusion between the old status system and the new power system. Put differently, the ritual hierarchy of closed status groups has transformed into a fairly open and fluid system of social stratification.

This system is in the making; it cannot be described either in caste terms or in pure class terms. However, the salience of one category in this newly emergent stratificatory system has become visible in recent years. It can be characterised as the 'new middle class': 'New' because its emergence is directly traceable to the disintegration of the caste system, this has made it socially much more diversified compared to the old, upper caste-oriented middle class that existed at the time of Independence. Moreover, high status in the traditional hierarchy worked implicitly as a criterion for entry into the old middle-class, and 'sanskritised' lifestyles constituted its cultural syndrome. Both rituality and Sanskritisation have virtually lost their relevance in the formation of the 'new' middle class. Membership of today's middle class is associated with new lifestyles (modern consumption patterns), ownership of certain economic assets and the self-consciousness of belonging to the middle class. As such, it is open to members of different castes—which have acquired modern education, taken to non-traditional occupations and/or command the higher incomes and the political power—to enter this middle class.

And yet, the new middle class cannot be seen as constituting a pure class category—a construct which in fact is a theoretical fiction. It carries some elements of caste within it, insofar as entry of an individual in the middle class is facilitated by the collective political and economic resources of his/her caste. For example, upper-caste individuals entering the middle class have at their

disposal the resources that were attached to the status of their caste in the traditional hierarchy. Similarly, for lower caste members, lacking in traditional status resources, their entry into the middle class is facilitated by the modern-legal provisions like affirmative action to which they are entitled by virtue of their low traditional status. It seems the Indian middle class will continue to carry caste elements within it, to the extent that modern status aspirations are pursued, and the possibility of their realisation is seen by individuals in terms of the castes to which they belong.

Crucial to the formation of the new middle class is the fact that while using collective resources of their castes, individuals from all castes entering it undergo the process of classisation; (a) they become distant from ritual roles and functions attached to their caste; (b) acquire another, but new, identity of belonging to middle class; (c) their economic interest and lifestyle converges more with other members of the middle class than with their non-middle-class caste compatriots.[...]

Secularisation of caste, occurring along the dimensions of de-ritualisation, politicisation and classisation, has reduced caste to a kinship-based micro-community, with its members acquiring new structural locations and identities derived from categories of stratification premised on a different set of principles than those of the ritual hierarchy. By forming themselves into larger horizontal social groups, members of different castes now increasingly compete for entry into the middle class. The result is, members of the lower castes have entered the middle class in sizeable numbers. This has begun to change the character and composition of the old, pre-Independence, middle class which was constituted almost entirely by a small English-educated upper-caste elite. The new and vastly enlarged middle class constituting about one-fifth of Indian population, is becoming, even if slowly, politically and

culturally more unified but highly diversified in terms of social origins of its members.

CASTE AND AGRARIAN CLASS

*A View from Bihar**

ANAND CHAKRAVARTI

My concern with the need to integrate the study of caste and class in Bihar is a consequence of my disagreement with the compartmentalised manner in which the two phenomena have featured in analyses of agrarian violence in the state. The explanations of the violence, especially in central Bihar since the late 1970s, have swung between underscoring the significance of class on the one hand and caste on the other. In 1977, Arun Sinha sought to amend what he perceived to be an erroneous interpretation of agrarian violence as 'atrocities against Harijans': for him the violence was symptomatic of 'class war' between 'landlords' and the 'landless' (Sinha 1977: 2037, 2039; 1978a, 1978b). Similar interpretations are discernible in the accounts of other scholars.¹ On the other hand the violence has also been projected as symptomatic of caste struggles between dominant castes² and subordinate castes, principally Dalits.³

I find it problematic to have to choose between the two positions because they postulate a false dichotomy between caste and class in rural Bihar. Indeed, the apparently contrasting representations of the violence actually articulate different dimensions of the same basic contradiction, which is located in the caste structure. The massacres of men, women, and children of the underclass perpetrated by militias of dominant castes⁴ is closely connected to caste, as a significant proportion of the underclass are Dalits and castes constituting the lower

stratum of the other backward classes (OBC).⁵ (I shall use the term depressed social groups to include both categories. Further, the term 'Dalit' (meaning oppressed) will cover both Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST).⁶ From time to time men of dominant castes have been victims of retaliatory violence by Naxalite groups.⁷ These conflicts between the underclass and dominant castes—who constitute the dominant class—have encompassed issues of status and dignity as well as economic issues. The former includes the resistance against sexual assaults by men of dominant castes on women of depressed social groups; the latter includes demands for the payment of statutory wages, or the distribution of public land and land above the ceiling to the landless.

I shall use my study of a village community in Purnea district (in north Bihar) to demonstrate the operation of the macro processes under analysis (Chakravarti 2001). The village, fictitiously named Aghanbigha, where I conducted intensive fieldwork, is located in the command area of the Kosi canal in Dhamdaha revenue circle.[...]

CASTE AND CLASS IN AGHANBIGHA

My study of Aghanbigha pointedly shows the close connection between caste and class.⁸ A broad social profile of the village is shown in Table 12.1. As Bhumihars dominated the village—they constituted 12.7 per cent of the households in the community (column 2), but controlled over three-fourths of its arable land (column 4)—they have been singled out among the upper castes. As shown in the table, the other upper castes held only 6 per cent of the land. The middle castes, categorised into 'upper middle' and 'lower middle,' together constituted about 50 per cent of the households in the village, and controlled about 11 per cent of the land. While the proportion of land held by

the middle category as a whole was small, it should be noted that the lower middle segment held a much lower proportion than those constituting the upper middle segment. Dalits constituted about 34 per cent of the households in the community, but the proportion of land held was extremely small (less than 5 per cent, as shown in column 4).

TABLE 12.1: Social Profile of Aghanbigha in 1979

Category		Households		Land Owned	
		Number	Percentage	(in acres)	Percentage
		(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Upper caste	Bhumihar	47	12.7	1591.97	79.1
	Others ^a	12	3.2	121.62	6.0
Middle caste	Upper middle ^b	58	15.6	180.63	9.0
	Lower middle ^c	126	34.0	30.78	1.5
Dalit	Scheduled Caste (SC) ^d	88	23.7	26.55	1.3
	Scheduled Tribe (ST) ^e	39	10.5	61.46	3.1
Muslim ^f		1	0.3	—	—
<i>Total</i>		<i>371</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>2,013.0</i>	<i>100.0</i>

Notes: (a) They include Brahmin, Rajput, and Kayasth. (b) Included in this category are five castes: Yadav, Kurmi, Kesarbani Vaish, Halwai, and Vaish Bania. The last three are listed under the same serial number in the Bihar list of Other Backward Classes (OBC) [Government of India 1980: 178]. (c) This category comprises the following six castes: Teli, Hajam, Tatma, Rajbhar, Ghatwar, and Markande. (d) The category comprises Dhobi, Dusadh, Musahar, Chamar, and Dom. (e) The only tribal community in the village is Santhal. (f) The only Muslim caste is Laheri (Lac Banglemaker).

Source: Chakravarti 2001: 112–21.

A profile of the principal classes forming the agrarian population of Aghanbigha is shown in Table 12.2.⁹ It should be noted that these classes do not explicitly convey the

notion of antagonistic groups, defined by contradictions of interests. Maliks were the dominant class, controlling about 79 per cent of the land (column 4). Significantly, they also belonged to the dominant bhumihar caste.¹⁰ They wielded three, inter-related or even overlapping, forms of power in the community, which was a consequence of the blending of class and caste dominance: social, economic, and coercive. These elements of power together formed what may be termed the 'culture of exploitation': the complex of norms upheld by maliks, which governed the relationship between them and the subordinate population. The term social power is used to define the capacity of maliks to assert their common interests as a collective. These interests were both material—such as exercising economic control over the labourers employed—as well as non-material—such as maintaining the 'honour' of the caste, which was inextricably bound up with ensuring the perpetuation of bhumihar dominance in the community. The social power wielded by maliks was reinforced by instrumental links with officials holding key positions in the executive arm of the state, including the police, revenue, labour, and development administrations, through whose connivance or active support they ensured that their interests were upheld. Indeed, there was a close connection between the social power of maliks and state power. The exercise of economic power, the second element underlying their class position, was derived from their pre-eminent control over land, which gave them the capacity to exploit hired labourers and perpetuate relations of dependence with pliant tenants. It is important to emphasise here that maliks exercised economic power in spite of being internally differentiated in terms of land control: some were rich, while others were poor. I maintain that their common social identity as members of a dominant caste was instrumental in forging a broad sense

of unity among them—in spite of differences in the amount of land owned. The coercive power of maliks, the third element in the triad, was articulated through the oppressive conditions of work they imposed on their labourers, which included the extraction of labour under conditions of extreme surveillance and the payment of low wages. Needless to say, the coercive power of ‘maliks’ was based on their social and economic power.

TABLE 12.2: Profile of Principal Classes in Aghanbigha in 1979

Principal Classes	Households		Land Owned	
	Number	Percentage	(in acres)	Percentage
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Malik	42	11.8	1579.92	79.2
Grihast	27	7.6	283.89	14.2
Tenant cultivator	20	5.6	44.51	2.2
Petty cultivator	69	19.4	86.04	4.3
Landless labourer	198	55.6	—	—
<i>Total</i>	<i>356</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>1,994.36</i> a	<i>100.0</i>

Note: (a) This figure *excludes* the land owned by the residual classes (18.65 acres): see n. 97.

Source: Chakravarti 2001.

Grihast, comprising about 8 per cent of the households, controlled 14 per cent of the land. The term is used here to designate upper (other than bhumihar) and middle caste landholders¹¹ who relied substantially on hired labour for undertaking agricultural operations. From this standpoint, grihasts resembled maliks. There was, however, a fundamental difference between maliks and grihasts because the latter did not wield social power. Therefore, while grihasts exploited their labourers economically on

the same pattern as maliks, they lacked the latter's capacity to dominate the community as a collective and to define the pattern of exploitation. In fact, grihasts benefited from the power of maliks in one crucial respect because the latter determined the terms and conditions governing the employment of labourers.

Tenant cultivators, who were mostly from middle castes, occupied a minor position in the class structure of the village. The members of this class owned a little over 2 per cent of the land in the community (as shown in the table). The amount of land leased in by the class as a whole was only about 4 per cent of the land owned in the aggregate by the principal classes together. In a general sense, tenant cultivators combined the attributes of grihasts and *bataidars* (sharecroppers). In conformity with the grihast model they hired in labour and did not work for others. On the other hand, like bataidars, they were beholden to well-placed landholders, especially among maliks, for leases of land. This reinforced their political subordination to the latter.

Petty cultivators (around 19 per cent of the households), comprising mainly Dalits, also held a marginal position in the structure of land control (as shown in the table). The small amount of land operated by a member of this class might be owned, or leased in, or might be partly owned and partly leased in. The working members of a petty cultivator's household were compelled to hire themselves out as agricultural labourers as the amount of land operated was grossly inadequate for a living. Thus, though some members of the class referred to themselves as *chhote kisan* (small cultivators), and others as bataidars, many simply described themselves as performers of *mazdoori* (labour). The precarious position of petty cultivators was a consequence of the changes in production relations associated with the development of agrarian capitalism (to be described later). Before the 1960s, many

of them were likely to have been bataidars. But in 1979–80 (the year of my field study) a slender line separated them from the ranks of full-fledged agricultural labourers. Indeed, the ominous prospect that the line could disappear altogether haunted especially those with holdings comprising only leased in land. Significantly, from the standpoint of the women of the class, who spent their entire working day labouring for others—in contrast to the menfolk, who had to devote some time to the cultivation of their holdings—the line in question had lost its meaning because they were, in effect, members of the rural labour force.

Landless labourers (about 56 per cent of the households) depended entirely on the sale of their labour power for their subsistence. They were drawn from a range of castes covering both the middle and Dalit categories. However, it should be noted that about 55 per cent of the households in the class belonged to the lower middle segment, and 35 per cent of the households were Dalits (the remainder belonged to the upper middle segment). As among petty cultivators, all able-bodied persons in a household, including males and females, were part of the labour force.

EXPLOITERS VS THE UNDERCLASS

For analytical purposes I have placed four of the five classes described here into two main categories: (i) principal exploiters of labour, comprising maliks and grihasts; and (ii) underclass, comprising petty cultivators and landless labourers (see Table 12.3). The basis of the first category is that both maliks and grihasts had access to land, and used the labour of petty cultivators and landless labourers to undertake cultivation for profit. However, it should be remembered that maliks, as the dominant class, were the most important component of this category. The basis of the second category is that the survival of both

petty cultivators and landless labourers depended on the sale of their labour power to the exploiters of labour.

TABLE 12.3: Class Profile of Aghanbigha by Caste Category

Category	No. of Households	Households Constituting			(2) as % of (1)	(3) as % of (1)	(4) as % of (1)
		Principal Exploiters ^a	Tenant Cultivators	Underclass ^b	(1)	(1)	(1)
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
Bhumihar	44	42	2	—	95.5	4.5	—
Others	12	12	—	—	100.0	—	—
<i>Upper caste total</i>	<i>56</i>	<i>54</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>—</i>	<i>96.4</i>	<i>3.6</i>	<i>—</i>
Upper middle	55	11	12	32	20.0	21.8	58.2
Lower middle	126	4	2	120	3.2	1.6	95.2
<i>Middle caste total</i>	<i>181</i>	<i>15</i>	<i>14</i>	<i>152</i>	<i>8.3</i>	<i>7.7</i>	<i>84.0</i>
Scheduled Caste	80	—	4	76	—	5.0	95.0
Scheduled Tribe	39	—	—	39	—	—	100.0
<i>Dalit total</i>	<i>119</i>	<i>—</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>115</i>	<i>—</i>	<i>3.4</i>	<i>96.6</i>
<i>All categories</i>	<i>356</i>	<i>69</i>	<i>20</i>	<i>267</i>	<i>19.4</i>	<i>5.6</i>	<i>75.0</i>

Notes: (a) Comprises maliks and grihasts. (b) Comprises petty cultivators and landless labourers.

Source: Chakravarti (2001).

As such, they may properly be regarded as an exploited underclass. The classification of households in Aghanbigha into exploiters and exploited [is] on the basis of antagonistic relations of production, as explained earlier. Accordingly, those designated as tenant cultivators may be

regarded simply as a residual class, as they fall outside this scheme.

The labouring population of the village—the underclass—could be categorised broadly into *jan* (labourers) and *naukar* (farm servants). The two categories together numbered 704 persons. The former (621 persons) were employed to perform a wide range of tasks relevant to cultivation, such as sowing, transplanting, weeding, preparing channels for irrigation, erecting bunds, and harvesting. The latter (83 persons) were employed for specific tasks pertaining to the running of a malik's farm. They comprised those who were directly involved in cultivating operations—for example, ploughmen, tractor drivers, and labour supervisors—and those who were not involved in cultivating operations—for example, herders of buffaloes and cows, bullock cart drivers, and watchmen of standing crops. Typically, jan were employed by the day, for which they received a daily wage, comprising both a cash component and a kind component (usually a specified amount of rice). As such, jan did not receive any wages on the days that there was no work. On the other hand naukar received a monthly wage, the raw ingredients of daily meals ('breakfast', 'lunch', and 'dinner'), and some items of clothing biannually. In principle, the work of a naukar was deemed to be perennial in character, unlike that of jan who were employed from time to time in conformity with the scheduling of agricultural operations.

Among those categorised as jan, a significant proportion (444 out of 621 or 71.5 per cent) were attached to their employers (I have designated them as unfree labourers) due to several factors, which included indebtedness, residence on the employer's land, and the allotment of a small tract of paddy land from which a labourer was entitled to one-third of the produce. Though debt alone was the explanation for the unfreedom of nearly one-fifth of the labourers, it operated in conjunction with the other factors

for the majority of the others. Thus, debt was the most pervasive source of unfreedom among labourers. The same was true of farm servants. Therefore, a significant proportion of the labour force in the village (those categorised as unfree labourers and farm servants respectively—527 out of 704 workers (75 per cent)—were for all practical purposes excluded from the labour market. The most significant consequence of unfreedom was that it obliged a labourer or a farm servant to work exclusively for his/her employer, and prevented him/her from negotiating work with another employer—thus inhibiting the operation of a free labour market. Further, as I have argued in my monograph, the denial of economic freedom to members of the underclass also had important political implications, because they faced severe constraints in being able to demand better working conditions.

The labour force in Aghanbigha also included a small proportion of casual labourers (177 out of 704 workers, 25 per cent), who had, in principle, the option to change their employers. I believe that their capability for free participation in a market situation was only notional for one important reason. While they happened to be unencumbered by debt or other obligations to specific employers at the time of my fieldwork, even they were liable to fall into debt in a moment of crisis due to the low wages paid to all categories of labourers (as shown later). Accordingly, the entire underclass in Aghanbigha was actually, or potentially, in a state of abject dependency in relation to their employers. This pathetic situation was aggravated by the absence of opportunities for employment outside agriculture—a direct consequence of underdevelopment. Further, none of the households of the labourers located in the village reported migration at the time of my fieldwork in the hope of negotiating better working conditions elsewhere—though the situation could be different today.

The strong connection between belonging to an upper caste and being an exploiter of labour is evident from columns 2 and 5 in Table 12.4: 54 of the 56 upper-caste households (96 per cent) used the labour of the underclass to undertake cultivation. Only two upper-caste households (both bhumihar) belonged to the class of tenant cultivators.¹² Among the middle castes as a whole there is evidently a decisive connection between caste status and being subject to exploitation: thus 84 per cent of the members of this category belonged to the underclass (column 7). Within the middle castes, however, it is the lower middle component that pre-dominated as members of the underclass: they constituted 120 out of the 152 underclass households in the middle category as a whole (column 4); further 95 per cent of the lower middle households belonged to the underclass, as shown in column 7. On the other hand, one-fifth of the upper middle component were exploiters of labour (column 5), and a little over the same proportion were tenant cultivators (column 6). Thus, the proportion of upper middle households constituting the underclass (58 per cent, column 7) was considerably less than the proportion of the lower middle component in the underclass.

The strongest connection between low social status and membership of the underclass is found among Dalits, as shown in the same table. With the exception of four SC households (who are tenant cultivators column 3), all the other Dalit households (comprising both SC and ST) were part of the underclass (column 4). Thus, about 97 per cent of the Dalit households belonged to the underclass (column 7). It is significant that the proportion of SC households in the underclass (95 per cent) corresponded with the proportion of lower middle caste households falling in the same class. Accordingly, as a general rule, the connection between low social status and being subject to

exploitation applied to all those categorised as socially depressed groups.

Table 12.4 is an exercise in examining the application of the above-mentioned rule to each caste from which the underclass is recruited. The households comprising each of the castes have been placed in two categories: those falling in the underclass and those falling in other classes. In seven of the 15 castes in the table (Tatma, Vaish Bania, Ghatwar, Rajbhar, Chamar, Musahar, and Santhal) all the households are part of the underclass (column 4). In four of the other castes (Hajam, Kurmi, Markande, and Dusadh) a decisive majority of households (80 per cent or above) fall into the underclass. Among the Dhobi, two-thirds of the households are underclass. Only among three castes is the connection between caste status and membership of the underclass either moderate or weak: among the Teli, half the households are underclass, and among the Halwai and Yadav less than half the households are in the underclass (see columns 4 and 5). In general, it is evident that for 12 of the 15 groups in the table, there is a strong connection between caste status and being subject to exploitation.

CONTRADICTIONS OF STRUCTURE

The principal contradictions in the class structure of contemporary Aghanbigha need to be explained in the light of the factors outlined earlier for Bihar in general. As shown earlier, due to these factors the life chances of the underclass are largely determined by their caste status. A brief historical background is necessary to understand the context in which these factors operated at the time of my fieldwork.

Till the 1960s, the maliks used the labour of sharecroppers (bataidars) to perform the actual tasks of cultivation. During the early decades of the twentieth century, for which there is definite information, santhals

comprised a substantial proportion of the bataidars. They cultivated the lands of their maliks under extremely oppressive conditions. In the late 1930s, the santhal bataidars in a large number of villages in Dhamdaha revenue circle launched a major agitation against their maliks for due recognition as tenants. The maliks in Aghanbigha retaliated by replacing their santhal bataidars by yadav immigrants from Monghyr, as well as others drawn from the ranks of Dalits, such as musahar, dusadh, and chamar. The frequent changing of bataidars became a necessary strategy to pre-empt them from staking claims as full-fledged tenants—who were protected from arbitrary eviction under the relevant tenancy laws (Chakravarti 2001: 265). Therefore, while sharecropping remained the dominant production relationship, the personnel were subject to turnover.

Owing to a conjuncture of circumstances occurring in the 1960s the maliks in Aghanbigha underwent a major re-orientation towards cultivation. These circumstances included land reform, ostensibly designed to protect the rights of tenants, as well as new technological interventions in the form of canal irrigation and tractorisation. The former aggravated the ongoing tensions in the malik-bataidar relationship, while the latter made cultivation under the personal charge of a landholder a profitable proposition. The maliks resumed much of the land leased to bataidars, in spite of tenancy laws designed to protect the latter's rights, and undertook cultivation by employing labourers—signifying a major change in the character of production relations. It needs to be emphasised that this transformation was brought about partly because the new technological interventions created the conditions for the maliks to pursue agriculture on capitalist lines, and partly because they needed to subvert tenancy laws to maintain their preponderant control over the land. While the supply of canal water during the kharif

and rabi seasons induced major changes in the traditional agricultural cycle, the use of tractors led to a quantum increase in the scale of cultivation. Lands falling under the command area of the canal could now be double-cropped, and even triple-cropped. The evolution of the new underclass in Aghanbigha was a direct consequence of these circumstances. With the waning of tenancy as an institution, labouring for others was the only viable means of livelihood not only for the landless but also for those with marginal holdings and those who leased in small amounts of land. In fact, for the last two categories (marginal landholders and small tenants—whom I have designated as ‘petty cultivators’) labouring for others was the only stable means of livelihood. For this reason both landless labourers and petty cultivators truly constituted a vast underclass (75 per cent of the households among the principal classes) that shared in significant ways the rigours of an exploited existence. Clearly, their sizeable presence was a direct consequence of the subversion of tenancy laws and the logic of agrarian capitalism.

The most obvious manifestation of the exploitation of the underclass in Aghanbigha was the payment of low wages. The problem was compounded by their illiteracy and general ignorance. Finally, the state was partial to the interests of maliks.[...]

In brief, the daily wages of labourers for various agricultural operations were 40 to 46 per cent of the statutory wages prevalent at the time of my fieldwork (I have designated the former as the ‘contemporary wage’). It is ironical that the contemporary wage was also much lower than the wage rate that prevailed in the community during the 1930s and 1940s (which I have called the ‘remembered wage’): the former was 58 per cent of the remembered wage.

Not surprisingly, several labourers underscored the deterioration in the terms of work, with an unmistakable

nostalgia for the past. For instance, they pointed out that the 'kothis' (earthen containers for storing grain) maintained by their forefathers were usually full, whereas it was common to find them empty now. Undoubtedly, agrarian capitalism had intensified the exploitation of labourers. Though the wages of farm servants were relatively better than those of agricultural labourers, they too were unable to earn the statutory wages. The shortfall varied according to the category of a farm servant, and also because some farm servants received a small allotment of land for the paddy season, whereas others did not. The wages of those who were paid the lowest remuneration (a category of ploughmen) was 44 per cent of the statutory wage whereas those who were best paid (tractor drivers who received small allotments of land) received 86 per cent of the relevant statutory wage.[...]

The exploitation of labourers was manifested not only in the low wages they were paid but also in the harsh discipline that governed their work. Maliks were obsessed with the desire to extract as much work as possible from their labourers, and thus maximise their returns. The rigorous use of labour time was a critical element in the process of profit generation. This objective was achieved by subjecting all agricultural operations to intense surveillance. The task of supervision was performed by maliks or grihasts themselves, or by employees designated as *sepahi*. The typical working day began a couple of hours after dawn and stretched on till dusk. Several labourers summed up the paranoid concern of their maliks with the extraction of work by accusing them of 'kaam ka bhook' (implying, appetite or hunger for work). In the same breath they drew attention to the pathetic indifference of the latter to their basic needs, which compelled them to be perennially concerned with the problem of overcoming hunger (*pet ka bhook*: hunger of the stomach).[...]

CONCLUSIONS

My basic argument in this essay is that caste continues to be the fundamental basis of social inequality in contemporary Bihar. Due to a range of factors, both the traditional and new dominant castes have privileged access to material and political resources, and constitute the dominant class. As a consequence those who belong to the depressed social groups are denied access to such resources. The circumstances of birth into a low-ranking caste, therefore, tend to determine their social and material conditions. They thus constitute a vast rural underclass, subject to both caste and class exploitation, as well as state repression. In the ultimate analysis the continuing oppression of the underclass in Bihar is a consequence of the organic linkage between dominant castes in the society at large—who constitute the dominant class—and the structures of the state^{[13](#)}. [...]

EMPLOYMENT,
EXCLUSION AND 'MERIT' IN
THE INDIAN IT INDUSTRY*

CAROL UPADHYA

The Indian information technology (IT) industry has been frequently hailed by the media, the state, and industry leaders as a significant new source of high quality and well-paid employment for the educated youth of India. With its recent rapid growth, the industry already employs more than one million people and is projected to generate many more jobs over the next few years. More important, the IT industry is often represented as providing employment opportunities to wider sections of the population than has been the case for most managerial, professional, and white collar jobs. Industry leaders frequently argue that because of the shortage of technically qualified people, they have had to look far and wide for workers, in the process drawing in many people from non-middle class/upper-caste backgrounds. Linked to this, a common narrative holds that employment does not depend on social connections (influence) or 'ascriptive' status (reservations)—unlike in the public sector and 'old economy' companies—but is based entirely on 'merit'. However, the social reality appears to be somewhat different. In this essay, I present data from a study of the IT workforce in Bangalore¹ and draw on other sources to show that the social profile of IT workers is largely urban, middle class, and high or middle caste. The processes of exclusion that operate in the education system and in the recruitment process to create this relative social homogeneity are delineated. Finally, I

discuss the ideology of merit that dominates the industry in the context of the recent debate on reservations.

I

SOCIAL COMPOSITION OF THE IT WORKFORCE

[...]

Socio-economic Class

Data from our study and several others (Athreye 2005; Rothboeck et al. 2001; Krishna and Brihmadeseam 2006; Oommen and Meenakshisundararajan 2005) suggest that most software engineers come from middle class, educated families. Taking parents' education and occupation as a proxy for socio-economic class (in the absence of reliable income data), our survey of software professionals in Bangalore found that 80 per cent of their fathers had graduate degrees or above, while only three respondents (out of 132) had fathers with less than SSLC-level education. In addition, 56 per cent of respondents' mothers were graduates or above.

With regard to occupation, 84 per cent of the fathers in our sample were engaged in occupations that are usually identified as 'middle class': they were managers or executives in public and private sector companies (21 and 10 per cent, respectively), government officers (21 per cent), professionals such as doctors and university professors (18 per cent), and businessmen (13 per cent). Only 9 per cent had fathers in lower level clerical (white-collar) or blue-collar jobs, and 3 per cent were from agricultural families.[...]

Rural-Urban Origin

Representatives of the software industry often claim that a large proportion of the workforce is drawn from rural and

semi-rural areas.[...] Our survey, however, indicates a different trend:

Thirty-six per cent of the sample was born in one of the five metros (including Bangalore), 29 per cent was from tier two towns and cities such as Mysore and Pune, and only 5 per cent came from rural areas. However, an interesting finding is that a substantial proportion—31 per cent—came from tier three towns, including district and taluk headquarters such as Tumkur, Guntur, or Madurai, and smaller, semi-urban towns.[...]

These figures suggest that the IT industry has not opened up significant new opportunities for people from rural areas, contrary to common perception. Even among those software engineers who come from rural and semi-urban areas, closer investigation of their background usually reveals that most are from relatively well-off agricultural families and have entered the profession after being educated in one of the many private engineering colleges located especially in the smaller towns of the southern states. While again there are no comprehensive data to substantiate this statement, ethnographic studies and anecdotal reports suggest that it is primarily the nouveau riche class of the more developed rural regions who have been able to take advantage of these new opportunities (Xiang 2002). So while the availability of private engineering education in rural areas and small towns has opened up an avenue for the entry of people from rural and semi-urban backgrounds into the IT profession, the available evidence suggests that it still has not become a significant means of social and economic mobility for the poor and for people from lower castes in rural areas. Moreover, it appears that a substantial proportion of software professionals from small towns belong to high castes, especially Brahmins.

Caste and Religion

With regard to caste and community, 88 per cent of respondents in our survey were found to be Hindus while only 5 per cent were Christians and 2 per cent Muslims. Brahmins constituted 48 per cent of our sample. The predominance of brahmins is not surprising, given their historical monopoly over higher education and formal sector employment, especially in south India (Fuller 1999; Fuller and Haripriya 2007). If we include others belonging to 'twice-born' castes, the figure for all upper castes comes to 71 per cent. Employees from dominant agricultural castes (including some which are classified as other backward classes [OBCs]) constituted 15 per cent, bringing the proportion of respondents who come from upper or dominant caste groups to 86 per cent. If we further include some of the Christian respondents, such as Syrian Christians (a relatively wealthy landowning community in Kerala), the proportion is even greater. Only one respondent said that he belonged to a scheduled community. Other studies have thrown up the same pattern: in the survey by Oommen and Meenakshisundararajan (2005), three-fourths of the respondents were from forward castes and the rest were Other Backward Classes (OBCs), while none were from the Scheduled Caste (SC)/Scheduled Tribe (ST) category (Fuller and Narasimhan 2006, 2007).

Social Profile of IT Professionals

The limited data available from our own and other studies suggest that the IT workforce is much more socially homogeneous than is often claimed by many industry leaders, in terms of class (middle class), caste (upper and middle caste), and regional (urban) background. However, this statement must be qualified by highlighting two distinctive features of its social composition: first, the large proportion who are from small towns, and second, the significant minority of workers from non-Brahmin middle to

high ranking and dominant (including some OBC) castes. While the fact that a substantial proportion of the workforce hails from small and medium size towns (which are often labelled as ‘rural’ by city-bred human resource managers) is often taken as evidence of the IT industry’s inclusiveness, this picture is misleading because most of such employees are from the upper and middle (dominant) caste groups—especially brahmins and landowning agricultural communities—that historically have benefited most from the spread of educational opportunities. Again, there should be nothing surprising in these findings, for given the pattern of inequality of opportunity in education that prevails in the country, any occupation that requires a high level of education and training—especially such a highly competitive one as IT—is bound to draw on the more privileged sections of society. It is not only inequalities in the education system that produce this social profile, however, it is also an outcome of the IT industry’s requirement for workers with a certain kind of cultural capital, who are capable of being moulded into ‘global professionals’, as I argue in the next section.

II

PRODUCTION OF THE IT WORKFORCE

Examination of the recruitment practices of IT companies reveals that there are several mechanisms that have the effect of privileging candidates with a certain social background. Of course, existing inequalities and exclusionary mechanisms in the higher education system produce a skewed pool of potential hires, over which the industry does not have control, but this is exacerbated by several of the selection procedures used.

The first important factor is that software companies recruit primarily engineering graduates—although they

also hire graduates and postgraduates with other computer-related degrees such as Master's in Computer Applications (MCA).² Studies show that the percentage of students from OBC, SC and ST categories graduating from engineering colleges (and from other professional and graduate courses) continues to be much lower than their percentage in the population, and that of higher castes correspondingly much higher. Further, upper-caste Hindu youth are two to four times more likely to be graduates than are youth from the OBC, SC, ST categories and Muslims (Deshpande 2006; Deshpande and Yadav 2006; Mohanty 2006). Since Hindu upper castes constitute almost 67 per cent of engineering and technology graduates (Deshpande 2006: 2439), it would not be surprising to find that upwards of 70 per cent of the IT workforce are upper caste.³

The advantageous position of the upper castes in education largely flows from historical factors and their class status. (We know that the Indian 'middle class', although it is becoming more heterogeneous, is predominantly upper caste in composition, although the reverse may not be true.) Given the mushrooming of private engineering colleges and coaching classes designed to help students get admission to the premier institutions, students from middle class and wealthy families have a clear advantage in higher education. Students from lower caste, rural, and working class families, on the other hand, are more likely to study in government schools and in the vernacular medium, to have less well-educated parents, and also lack the economic and cultural resources to develop their merit (high marks in examinations). All these factors work together to create a bias in the social composition of potential IT hires.

Apart from the inherent inequality in the pool of candidates that is created by the education system, there

are certain features of the recruitment process that tend to favour middle class (and upper caste) candidates. Here I focus only on the campus placement process, which is the major source of new recruits for IT companies, rather than recruitment as a whole. The first filtering mechanism that comes into play here is the fact that all the major IT companies visit only selected institutions each year to recruit students, based on their ranking of engineering colleges.⁴ The large companies usually visit 50 to 60 campuses, while multinational corporations (MNCs) and the medium-sized Indian products or services companies may visit about 10 select campuses. The rankings of the top 50 colleges are more or less the same for all the companies, and the majority of engineering colleges are not even ranked by the major companies. This means that for the major companies (which are the largest employers), the pool of candidates is limited at the outset to students of the best engineering colleges in India.

Second, only those students with a certain cut-off percentage throughout their course (usually 70 per cent aggregate marks) are allowed to apply for placement. In fact, many IT companies require candidates to have had a consistent average of 70 to 75 per cent marks from standard 10 onwards. This requirement tends to exclude engineering students who have gotten seats on government quotas (SC/ST or OBC) with lower cutoff marks and who were not able to score well in previous examinations because of their educational and social background.

The third level of filtering occurs during the interview process, which follows a written test (usually of logical, analytical, and problem-solving skills, as well as English and maths). First there is a group discussion to evaluate communication skills, personality and spontaneous thinking abilities. The candidates who are short-listed in this round are then individually interviewed. There are two types of

interview—technical and human resource (HR). The HR interview is designed to assess non-technical attributes of candidates, such as attitudes and values, personality, career aspirations, and ‘soft skills’, and to determine whether s/he will ‘fit’ into the company’s culture. The most important ‘soft skill’ that is assessed during the HR interview is communication skill. Since many software jobs, especially in services companies, are ‘client-facing’, good communication skills are considered to be essential, and a candidate who is otherwise well qualified may be rejected purely on this basis. The requirement for good spoken English, which is assessed during the interview, tends to exclude those from lower caste, rural, and less privileged backgrounds. While fluency in English is a basic requirement, the term ‘communication skills’ refers more broadly to the ability to converse and interact easily in different social and cultural situations. The assessment of the candidate’s general appearance, demeanour, and ‘ability to mingle’ during the HR interview acts effectively as an exclusionary mechanism, in that it is weighted against those who are not from middle class, cosmopolitan and English-speaking backgrounds. Good communication and social skills, confidence, and the right kind of personality are elements of cultural capital that students from urban middle class (and usually high caste) families are most likely to possess (Fuller and Narasimhan 2006). With the increasing emphasis that is placed on soft skills by the IT industry, candidates from non-metropolitan, non-middle class, and lower caste backgrounds are even more likely to be passed over. Thus, students who have entered engineering colleges through government quotas, who have the requisite marks in their engineering course, and who have passed the initial written tests, are still likely to be ‘weeded out’ in the subsequent rounds.

Thus, the sharp disparities in the higher education system together with the industry’s recruitment practices tend to

skim off only the cream among engineering graduates as well as privileged students with the right kind of cultural capital—social skills, communication style, deportment, and so on. In addition, these filtering mechanisms have created a system of stratification within the IT workforce, in that a software engineer's position and career prospects in the industry are largely determined by his or her educational background. While graduates from the IITs and other premier institutions land the best jobs (in MNCs and the more challenging technical jobs in reputed companies), those from tier two and three colleges tend to be slotted into the more routine and low-end jobs. For instance, several of the large Indian software services companies prefer to hire students from tier three campuses rather than from the top ranking colleges, because the best students are not suitable for the kind of routinised work that is on offer. As an HR manager put it, they require 'guys who can just sit and code and not ask questions'. This remark suggests that hiring practices tend to reproduce within the industry the social hierarchy or class fractions that characterise the middle class in general: the best 'high-end' and top management jobs are likely to be monopolised by people from more privileged social backgrounds (i.e. middle to upper class and caste, from the best institutions), while greater 'diversity' may be found at the lower end of the job market.⁵

In sum, the IT industry looks for certain 'social types' to fill its ranks of 'knowledge workers' and designs recruitment procedures to filter out those who do not 'fit'. Hiring practices also slot recruits into the workforce at different levels, according not only to educational qualifications but especially social skills and cultural capital.

IDEOLOGY OF 'MERIT' AND REPRODUCTION OF PRIVILEGE

The foregoing discussion challenges the dominant industry position that entry into the IT industry is completely based on merit, that factors such as caste, region, gender and class are irrelevant, and that it has created significant new employment opportunities for rural youth and for the socially and economically disadvantaged. It hardly needs to be pointed out that the merit argument ignores the social and economic factors that produce 'meritorious' candidates in the first place, especially the continuing monopoly over a certain kind of cultural capital that is enjoyed by the middle class—which is composed mainly of upper castes—due to their greater access to the best educational institutions and other processes of social closure. This is not to suggest that the industry deliberately practices caste (or any other kind of) discrimination in recruitment. Rather, the worker profile required by this outsourcing business makes it more difficult for people from non-urban and lower caste/class backgrounds to enter, because certain social and cultural attributes are thought to be necessary to work in a 'global' environment. This situation has been acknowledged by industry leaders, who have repeatedly urged, for instance, that English be introduced at the primary level in government schools and that appropriate soft skills be taught in schools and colleges, in order to expand the pool of qualified candidates. Of course, IT companies need to hire people with the requisite skills for the jobs, and they cannot be faulted for having to choose from a limited and skewed pool of candidates. However, there is an apparent contradiction between the limited recognition that processes of exclusion do operate in the industry, and the official position that upholds merit and individual achievement as the sole criteria for recruitment. For this

reason, it is important to examine closely the operation of the ideology of merit in the industry and its role in the production of the IT workforce.

Although there is some recognition on the part of industry leaders that the workforce is not as inclusive as it could be, most are firmly opposed to legal or administrative action to remedy this situation or to increase diversity. Indeed, IT industry leaders—and even ‘techies’ themselves—have been at the forefront of opposition to the recently revived proposal for reservations in the private sector, as well as the new policy of reservations for OBCs in premier institutions of higher education.⁶[...]

The industry’s position on this question flows in part from its growing requirement for large numbers of highly educated and ‘learnable’ young people: the spectre of reservations that threatens to open the doors of premier institutes to masses of ‘unmeritorious’ students in their view would further reduce the pool of ‘employable’ engineers. The standard argument is that reservations or affirmative action would adversely impact the industry’s competitiveness (and hence its ability to provide more employment for India’s youth). Instead, steps should be taken to make young people from rural areas and lower castes more competitive in the job market, especially by improving the quality of school education. To this end, and also in order to be seen as ‘good corporate citizens’, several IT companies have funded and led initiatives in the area of primary education. Industry leaders have also repeatedly blamed the government’s poor performance in education for the dearth of qualified candidates and ‘poor quality’ of most engineering graduates, and the industry has taken steps to upgrade and re-orient engineering education to better suit its needs.⁷

The staunch opposition to reservations or affirmative action that is the dominant position of most IT (and other)

industry leaders is closely linked to their support for liberalisation. It is this connection that has elevated the ideology of merit to an article of faith. Industry spokespersons often claim that the IT industry has flourished in India primarily because of the absence of state interference or control, and that it would not have grown as fast as it has if it had been subjected to the kind of bureaucratic controls that typified the Nehruvian planned economy. This provides the basis for their argument against any kind of government ‘interference’ (including, for instance, the application of labour laws), and allows them to insist that IT companies must be left free to hire the most meritorious people in order to maintain their competitive edge (without interference by the state in the form of reservations). The notion that the IT industry has grown because of liberalisation neglects the fact that it has all along received substantial support from the state, both directly in the form of various subsidies, tax holidays, provision of land and infrastructure, and other policy measures, and indirectly in the form of the large pool of ‘knowledge workers’ that has been produced through state investments in higher education over several decades (Balakrishnan 2006; Parthasarathy 2005). Given this history, from a policy point of view one could make a case that the industry should give something back to the state and to the wider society. Yet, because of its central symbolic position in the current discourse on India’s new development path under liberalisation, the IT industry has been able to sustain a large degree of autonomy from state regulation, in part by promoting its image as a ‘new’ kind of industry—meritocratic, open, and socially committed—that is providing ample (and equal) opportunities to anyone willing to work hard enough to take advantage of them.

CORPORATE SECTOR AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

The discussion in this essay suggests that one of the reasons for the IT industry's success is that it has been able to tap the existing cultural capital of the urban middle classes (which consist primarily of high and middle castes)—including their educational attainments, knowledge of English, and some degree of westernised social orientation and habitus. The IT workforce is drawn mainly from this section of society, and by providing new and lucrative employment opportunities it is in turn contributing to the reproduction and consolidation of middle-class/upper-caste domination. The middle class is certainly expanding in size and diversity, and the IT industry has been an important force behind this process by pulling at least some people from non-dominant social groups into the middle class. Yet, in the final analysis, the industry cannot be said to have contributed to overcoming the deep social and economic divisions that continue to characterise Indian society. This in itself would not be cause for criticism—for one may argue that it is not the role of the corporate sector to remedy social ills—were it not for the continual litany that emanates from IT industry leaders about the opening up of employment opportunities, which in turn is attributed to their commitment to merit. In this context, it is not unfair to examine closely the production and composition of the IT workforce, rather than accepting the industry's representations of itself at face value. For instance, the industry's emphasis on the need to improve primary education, while laudable, also has the effect of deflecting attention away from the question of exclusionary processes in employment. It is also based on the individualist liberal assumption that all that is required is to provide every child with an education that will enable him or her to 'compete' on an equal footing. This notion, like the ideological opposition to positive discrimination of any kind, reflects a

complete denial of the unequal distribution, by class and caste (and other divisions such as gender and religious community), of the cultural, social, and economic capital required to become an IT professional.⁸

In the context of rising political support for reservations in higher education and private sector employment, it would in fact be in the interest of IT companies to formulate or support some kind of positive discrimination policy (statutory or voluntary) and to increase the diversity of their workforces. For instance, although the pool of qualified OBC and SC/ST engineers may be smaller than that of engineering graduates from upper castes, given the large number of graduates overall it should be possible for companies to evolve preferential hiring policies (together with training programmes) to ensure the inclusion of employees from more diverse backgrounds. However, given the bias against any kind of protective discrimination among most of the elite and the middle classes, proposals for caste-based reservations are usually dismissed out of hand. In order to forestall criticism and the possible imposition of quotas, several companies have already taken steps to increase the diversity and inclusiveness of their workforces, for instance by floating internship schemes and training programmes for rural youth and SC engineers. This may then be the right time to open up the debate on inclusion and exclusion in private sector employment and to push the IT industry (and other major employers) to rethink their hiring policies and to make commitments on this issue.

WHERE THE PATH LEADS

*The Role of Caste in Post-university
Employment Expectations**

ASHWINI DESHPANDE AND KATHERINE S. NEWMAN

The purpose of the present project is to understand the extent to which similarly qualified Indian students diverge in the labour market according to their caste backgrounds and, secondarily, whether a similar interpretation of 'caste advantage' develops in the context of reservations.

Our sample is primarily drawn from the three national universities in Delhi: Delhi University (DU), Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) and Jamia Milia Islamia (JMI).¹ All the students in our sample have completed their undergraduate programmes and we have information about their final exam performance.[...]

PRELIMINARY RESULTS

These analyses include 173 students who were completing postgraduate degrees from four universities in the Delhi area. Over half (53 per cent) were graduating from the MA programme in economics from DU. Most of the remaining students (38 per cent) were completing degrees at JNU. About 35 per cent were women and 65 per cent were men.

Nearly 28 per cent were reserved category students. Reserved category students were disproportionately men: 83 per cent of the reserved category students, compared to 58 per cent of non-reservation students were men.

In terms of religious or communal background, for the sample as a whole 71 per cent were Hindus and 12.7 per cent were Muslims. The remainder of the students were Sikhs, Buddhists, Christians and Jains.

(a) Diverging expectations: Long before our sample confronts the labour market, their expectations of what they will find has diverged by reservation/non-reservation status. In bivariate comparisons, graduating reservation students had significantly lower occupational expectations than their non-reservation counterparts. The average expected monthly salary for reservation students was Rs 19,510, while non-reservation students expected to earn about Rs 24,470.

We asked each student to describe their ideal job but also to tell us what job they realistically expected to find. The contrasts between reservation and non-reservation students in terms of expectations were sharp. The majority of Dalits listed jobs in the public sector: 45 per cent mentioned administrative services/IPS, and another 28 per cent would ideally seek jobs as teachers or academics or researchers.

Non-reservation students were much more likely to report an ideal job as a business analyst or corporate planner (19 per cent of non-reservation students compared to 9 per cent of Dalits) or in the social or development sector (15 per cent compared to 2 per cent for Dalits). Relatively few non-reservation students viewed the administrative services as an ideal job (12 per cent compared to the 45 per cent of Dalits).

The largest area of overlap in terms of ideal job was in teaching, academic and researcher jobs: many non-reservation students thought that ideal (30 per cent), as did 28 per cent of Dalits. Also confirming the lower expectations of Dalit students, a small minority of Dalit

students (2 per cent) thought of clerical type office jobs as ideal whereas none among the non-Dalits did.

The expectation among Dalit postgraduates that they would find jobs in the public sector was further confirmed by the proportion who had taken the requisite civil service exams. At the time of the baseline survey, far more reservation students (nearly 67 per cent) had taken the civil service exam than non-reservation students (34 per cent).

(b) Family businesses, family connections, parental education: The differential ability of reservation and non-reservation students to benefit from family resources—ranging from business where they might find jobs, to social networks that could be activated in the search for employment, to the cultural capital (or ‘know-how’) that will help inform a student of advantageous options—is very pronounced. For example, nearly 18 per cent of non-reservation students said that someone in their family owned a business where the student might be employed compared to only 8.5 per cent of reservation students.[...]

Differences in family background (measured by parents’ occupations) for the two groups of students are quite stark. The occupational distribution of fathers of the non-reservation students shows that the single largest category (16.5 per cent) is either self-employed or in big business. Thereafter, we find fathers who are managers or in the banking sector (11.5 per cent each). Ten per cent of the fathers are doctors, engineers, software engineers, or in the IT sector. Another 10 per cent are farmers. Smaller proportions (around 5 per cent each.) are lawyers or chartered accountants and academics/researchers.

In contrast, the fathers of almost 33 per cent of reservation students are farmers. Even though both categories list ‘farming’ as father’s occupation, the follow-up interviews reveal that the Dalit fathers are noticeably

smaller farmers compared to non-Dalits. This is followed by 15 per cent of the fathers who are academics/researchers, and lawyers, chartered accountants and have been part of the voluntary retirement scheme (VRS) (9 per cent each). Then 8.6 per cent are government servants or members of the civil service. Other than farming, all the other professions either have reservation quotas for public sector jobs or the courses that lead to these occupations (medicine, engineering, law) can be pursued in government institutions via quotas. There is a small proportion, roughly 4 per cent each, in the development sector and manager/banking.

We asked the students if their mothers worked outside the home. Fifty-eight per cent of the non-reservation students had non-working mothers compared to 81 per cent of Dalit students. Thus, an overwhelming majority of Dalit students in our sample come from single income families. The distribution of occupations for mothers who are working is much wider for the non-reservation students as compared to the Dalit students.

As the qualitative section to follow makes clear, family background plays a major role in the selection process during job interviews and on this score, relatively few Dalit students can claim similar background characteristics.[...]

MOVING INTO THE LABOUR MARKET

These group differences are clearly reflected in the follow-up interviews we conducted to learn more about their subjective experience of the educational process designed to prepare them for entry into the professional labour market, as well as their initial experiences with employment, often taken during their final years of education.

(a) Reservations are critical: Almost without exception, the Dalits in our sample endorsed the purpose of reservation

policy and were convinced that without it, they would have had no chance to obtain a higher degree. 'I am here because of reservations', noted Mukesh,² a political science student at JNU.

Because of my background, even though I had the talent, I could not study because of financial problems. We never got a chance to buy books, to get tuition. But we got through because of reservations. I am ahead by a few steps because of reservations.

Indeed, for Mukesh, quotas in higher education not only enabled his ascent in the university world, it literally enabled him and his fellow reservation students to 'open their mouths', meaning speak their minds and 'go to the centre of society', where they can 'meet other people ... and get a platform'. The silence imposed by marginality, caste prejudice and poverty breaks down when Dalit students are introduced to another world and a different future.[...]

Globalisation is creating enormous opportunities for the Indian economy, most of which fall into the private sector. It is common knowledge that big money is to be made there. Increasingly the public sector is seen as a backwater of inefficiency and students who can manage it are flocking to the high technology sector.

Our interview subjects were well aware of this trend and worried by it since reservations do not presently apply to the private sector. Even if they are willing to trade lucrative opportunities (that may or may not be available to them on the grounds of bias or skill) for the accessibility and security of the public sector, this alternative is disappearing. The solution, they argue, is to see reservations extended to the private sector, to continue

Ambedkar's mission of social justice to the domain where all the action is likely to be in the foreseeable future.[...]

As long as discrimination (institutional and individual) persists, Dalit students argued, reservations will be needed. The reservation policy levels the playing field at the vital choke points of social mobility.[...]

Of course, these students are aware that their sense of legitimacy is not shared by the dominant classes and castes in India. The reservations policy is condemned for punishing innocent non-reservation students for the damage done in the past, reinforcing caste lines rather than striving for a caste-free society, and exempting Dalits from the rigours of market competition. Indian critics of reservations argue that it replaces one form of discrimination (against Dalits) with another, equally pernicious form (against non-reserved students or workers).

These perspectives are unconvincing from the viewpoint of our Dalit interviewees, though, who argue that the most powerful special privileges actually accrue to high caste Hindus who can tap into exclusive social networks, bank on the cultural capital their families bequeath to them, or pay the bribes that are demanded by employers for access to jobs.[...]

(b) Entry into labour market: At this point in our study, 73 per cent of the reserved students are still enrolled in advanced degree programmes at the three universities from which we pulled our sample. However, given the needs they face to support themselves and their families, they are often seasoned in the ways of the labour market even before graduation.

Our first observation of their experience searching for work is that despite their status as students from elite universities, caste always figures in the matching process. For many civil service positions, the lists of candidates to

be interviewed are organised by caste and the information is not received in a neutral fashion.[...]

Several of the Dalit respondents explained that because they lack 'push' (pull) it was clear that they had no chance. An influential network of supporters is required to push ahead of the crowd for desirable jobs both in the public or private sector. At times money is the issue. Bribery is reportedly quite widespread. One respondent reports giving Rs 10,000 for a job he did not get and explained that he was unable to get the money back. For most of these students, jobs known to require bribes are simply off limits: they do not have the money and cannot apply.[...]

Even perfectly legal hiring practices impose barriers on Dalit students from poor backgrounds. For example, travelling to an interview may be prohibitively expensive. Rakesh took three examinations for jobs with the national railway company and when called for interviews, could not afford the expense of staying overnight or paying for his food. 'One interview was in Calcutta', he explained, 'another was in Guwahati. I had to go there and stay there and have meals there. For this, I need money that I was not having, so I could not attend that interview.'

Caste barriers can be subtle as well as direct. Employers recognise the signal of surnames that are caste identified and students know that their names trigger employment interview questions that non-Dalits are never asked. In particular, when private sector employers raise pointed questions about the legitimacy of reservation policy itself, a policy that presently does not apply to these firms, students are placed on the defensive. This was a common experience for reservation students.

As reported elsewhere,³ employers are given to asking questions to all applicants about their 'family background'. For students from non-reservation backgrounds, the questions appear innocuous, and indeed they are regarded

by everyone as a standard human resources practice. For reservation students, however, truthful answers may be stigmatising to the point of disqualification. Their fathers do not have the kinds of occupations that confirm the student's suitability for professional jobs; their families are 'too large'; and most of all, the student may end up revealing the degree to which he or she is burdened by demands for support from their families.

Nathu Prasad, a political science student at JNU, applied for a job at a national research centre. He expected to be asked 'about my NET exam or my MA, but there was no need to ask about my background, income source and all these things'.

They asked me about my parents, what they do. So I said they own a small bit of land, they are farmers, but they also do small business. I got the feeling that I was being singled out for these kinds of questions. I later asked some other boys who were there and they said that they had not been asked....

I don't think that these questions were neutral.... I knew the topic that I had to speak on, they knew my qualifications, so if they had asked about that I wouldn't have had any problem. Problem is that by asking other questions, they can find out about our "low label".[...]

Dalit students are aware that these barriers are out there in the labour market well before their graduation from higher degree courses. For some, concern runs so high that they decide to conceal the truth in hopes of landing the jobs they want.[...]

In order for reservations policy to be operational in education and public employment, caste identity must be affixed to qualify. SC status is made clear in official records

from high school graduation certificate to university files. If this knowledge was merely part of a bureaucratic record, the story would stop at that. But it becomes part of a moral narrative in which the student's right to the education he has received, his genuine talents, and his fitness for a job are questioned by those who hold negative assumptions on all three counts. In a society where educational opportunity is extremely scarce relative to the demand, in which good jobs are highly coveted since there are too few for all of the qualified people seeking them, the job interview becomes more than a means of matching applicants to positions. It becomes an occasion for political debate that throws Dalit students on the defensive.

THE OTHER SIDE OF THE FENCE

Students in India—reserved and non-reserved alike—face extraordinary competition for spaces in higher education and public/private employment. At the same time, India's unparalleled growth has opened up opportunities for university graduates and the sense throughout our interviews was that students with advanced degrees can look forward to a much better future than might have been true in the past.

The non-reservation respondents reported far more favourable interviews and selection procedures when job hunting than reserved students, as well as a more positive 'interpretive disposition'. By this we mean that matching procedures that reserved and general students both experience are interpreted by the former as indicative of questionable intent, while experienced as neutral or even positive by general students.

Few general students were asked about their caste or religious background. This was clearly a difference that mattered, but it must be noted that many reserved students were not asked about caste either. Their last names signal

their caste membership in some instances, and questions on family background reveal the rest. The non-reservation students were able to bring to bear on the job interview, fluency in English, confidence in their academic skills, and advanced knowledge of what they would be expected to demonstrate in the way of 'fitness for the firm' than Dalit students, whose cultural capital was weaker.

General students did not see themselves as privileged because of these qualities, even if they recognised that the distribution of these skills was differential. These are merely the talents that firms are looking for, including ease in social situations like interviews.

(a) Job interviews: Bharat, a sociology student at JNU, typified the reaction of general students to their job interview experience. It was an occasion overlaid with tension, because an evaluation is in progress. But on the whole, the interview was a learning experience, not a test of cultural fitness:

... the interview ... teaches you a lot to handle the tension.... Just adjusting to the ambience, the environment of the interview, helps a lot. So many questions are asked and one question is followed by another. You need to keep your mind cool enough in special circumstances.

The only negative experience Bharat could remember from his many rounds of interviews was one where he was 'asked to come at 10 am and the interview began at 1:30 pm'. This was a 'bitter experience' he noted.

General students experienced a problem that many reserved students interpreted as caste discrimination: the proforma interview, conducted for bureaucratic reasons only. For general students, the idea that a job has already been handed over to an inside candidate or someone with social connections superior to their own is a recognised

fact. It happens all the time. Preeti, a Delhi School of Economics student, described the experience in detail:

I went to another college [for an interview]. There was an internal candidate, so she was given the job and my interview lasted only 2-3 minutes. It was virtually decided that she had to be taken in. [The interview] was a formality for me. I did ask my professor [who was on the interview board] "You won't ask anything else?" He said, "Yes, I won't ask anything". They were not treating me seriously. I know because just 15 days [before] I faced [an interview at another college] and the interview lasted a complete ½ hour and asked lots of questions.

Preeti did not understand this experience as a commentary on her fitness; indeed, she regarded herself as perfectly well qualified, but outmanoeuvred. The 'wired' interview does not lead general students to believe that they will be shut out of upward mobility. If anything, it indicates to them that they too must cultivate their networks. For the Dalit student, a wired interview is one more piece of evidence that they are going to face a very long uphill struggle for mobility because they don't have easy access to the 'inside track'.

The value of cultural capital, of understanding the social skills that need to be on display in an interview cannot be overstated. With so many applicants qualified on the grounds of skills and knowledge, Indian firms are looking for people who 'fit', a matching process noted by American researchers of the labour market as well.⁴ For general students, a university education is often a continuation of a lifelong process of cultivation not unlike what elite students in American ivy league universities experience. They move

in to the task of job hunting with a degree of confidence that they have the social skills to function appropriately, to avoid being overly nervous, to project an air of cosmopolitanism that may be the final element that distinguishes them from other students with similar technical credentials.

Abhijit, a Delhi School of Economics student, described his experience with job interviews in tones strikingly different from even the most positive encounters among the Dalit students:

Most of my interviews were very relaxed. No one was assessing my knowledge or anything, but ... seeing how well and efficiently I contribute to the company. So, the positive feedback purely in terms of the fact that I had high success rate in terms of clearing interviews that is making me feel good. I was competitive enough to get a job later if I wanted to.... None of my interviews were stressful at all. They were all very friendly for me. For example, when I had my interview with [information firm], he asked me why I want to work in Bombay? That is one of the cities that never sleeps and lots of stuff to do there. So the interview was more in terms of what I like, what I dislike and general chit chat about what I was looking to do in the future rather than quizzing me about, let's say what particular topics I had done in a particular [academic] subject or something like that.

Lacking cultural capital when they arrive in elite universities, Dalit students—most especially those from rural backgrounds—are not in a position to improve their cultural exposure beyond what they acquire inside the university itself. This is not minimal. Coming to a place like JNU from a remote tribal region does indeed create

opportunities for exchange and personal growth in a cosmopolitan direction. But if one must work at the same time, it will be hard to take this any farther. Not so for non-reservation students who may have many opportunities to widen their horizons outside of the university during their years as students.[...]

(b) The family background test: Virtually all of our study subjects reported being asked about their family backgrounds during employment interviews. Non-reservation students can offer biographies that are much closer to the upper-middle class, professional ideal. Hence the questions are rarely interpreted as offensive or prying. And the answers are almost always in line with positive images of family life, as Aditya, a Delhi School student recounted:

Couple of people asked me about my family background, about what my father does, whether I have any siblings or what my mother does? No one asked me about my religion or caste. I told them that my dad is a government servant, he is working in the Indian Railways and my mom is also in the Bank of [my region]. My sister is a doctor. So that was more courtesy, interested kind of questions that the interviewer broached up. They made me more comfortable rather than judging me on what my parents do or not do. I am sure I did not make any negative kind of influence at all in my case. It might have had positive impact to see in terms of my parents are well educated and my sister is also well educated and everyone is doing well.

While Dalit students often perceive a hidden agenda in family background questions, for non-reservation students the same questions appear to be innocuous or sensible inquiries from a human resources perspective. They are not

‘gotcha’ questions designed to discredit an applicant who is presenting herself as an educated, highly trained proto-professional.⁵ [...]

It is impossible to judge who has the ‘right story’ on family background from these interviews and it is not clear that they are contradictory either. It is entirely possible that family background questions are used to identify caste or other background information that would be disqualifying in the eyes of employers who are not willing to employ Dalit applicants, or applicants with particularly needy families. It is also quite possible that human resource practice inclines firms to ask questions that help them ascertain the risks of attrition. The questions themselves do not provide a window on what they are used for when the winnowing process begins.

Yet, if we couple these findings with the observations from studies of employer interviews (Jodhka and Newman 2007), there is some reason for concern that family background is used to ‘ratify’ the claims presented on the surface by a job candidate to be a ‘suitable person’ for a position, with siblings whose trajectories confirm his or her own ‘impression management’ (to use Erving Goffman’s well-known term). To the extent that this is the case, being able to give a socially acceptable answer about parental occupation or family size will be helpful. The converse could knock an otherwise qualified candidate out.

(c) Equal opportunity: Two distinct positions were evident among non-reservation students with respect to quotas. The first simply rejects the notion that they are appropriate at all, since the reservation policy is deemed as a violation of fairness principles and therefore an unfair tipping of the scales in what is meant to be a competition on the basis of merit. A variant of this view sees quotas as perfectly appropriate, but not if given along caste lines. Instead, economic deprivation or social backwardness should be the

appropriate test. Here we see lines of convergence with many Dalit students from rural areas who also resent the application of reservation to 'the creamy layer' within their own caste.

The second recognises the legitimacy and purpose of reservation and seems to be enhanced by the interactive relations between Dalit and high caste students.[...]

Both outcomes are clear in our sample.

Akhilesh, a sociology general student from JNU, exemplifies the conservative reaction to quotas. 'I am not very happy with the Indian government actually bringing in such reservation', he complained.

I think such barriers should not be allowed because when we are competing, we should compete on the basis of merit. Today one person is getting into IIT with no brains whatsoever, just by virtue of reservations. Whereas certain excellent students are not getting into IIT because general quota is full....

In jobs, also the same thing. Somebody who is an SC ... gets the job and somebody like me who is not getting a job because I don't have any caste certificate.... It should be equal because we are all living in the same country. If you can really identify the poorest people who have very low annual income.... I think then there is some reason to support reservation.

Many who share this view argue strenuously that the application of reservations will destroy the competitiveness of the Indian economy and drive away foreign investors because of the privileges insured by reservation. Hence, they fuse personal exclusion with a national downfall in the making.

Other critics of reservations argue that the policy may indeed be positive, but ends up being a colossal waste because the high dropout rates that SC and ST students suffer from negates their impact. These places could have been taken by non-reservation students who would complete their demanding courses, but instead are taken by people who had almost no chance, by virtue of poor preparation. Kavita, an economics student at Delhi University, was sympathetic in many ways to the cause of reducing inequality, but frustrated by the outcomes. 'When I was a student,' she explained, 'there were about 80 of us in college. Out of these, about 20 were from the quota.'

But by the time we reached the third year, virtually all of the reserved students dropped out, because they could not clear [pass] the courses.... Reservation should be given to them only in things that help them gain employment. If the cut off [on entrance exams] is 90 per cent and you are admitting a person with 35 or 40 per cent in a course like economics, medical or engineering, you very well know that he/she cannot be. He is not fit to clear the course....

What is the value, she asks, of a policy that produces dropouts and deprives the capable of a place because they lack a quota on their side? This is a view many non-reservation students embrace.

But they are not a monolithic voice. On the other side of the equation are non-reserved students for whom equality is a high principle and the barriers to achieving it for historically oppressed peoples clear enough. They embrace the purpose of reservation and see in it the possibilities of upward mobility. Among these supporters, there are differences of opinion nonetheless about the effectiveness of reservations for some of the same reasons that critics

voice: high dropout rates. The lesson to be learned for these more progressive students, though, is not to abandon reservations, but redouble efforts to address educational inequality at much younger ages. Without a massive commitment to improving primary school education, they argue, we cannot really expect reservations to succeed. If not for reasons of equity, then for reasons of efficiency, differential investment is required.

CONCLUSION

This study attempts to trace the differential pathways that Dalit and non-Dalit students, from comparable, elite educational backgrounds, traverse in their journey from college to work. Since all of our respondents are not yet in the job market, this essay attempts to analyse their experience so far: their expectations and their understanding of how the urban, formal, skilled labour market operates, based mainly on early experience in the work world, prior to graduation.[...]

Our study so far suggests that social and cultural capital (the complex and overlapping categories of caste, family background, network and contacts) play a huge role in urban, formal sector labour markets, where hiring practices are less transparent than appear at first sight.

RUPTURES AND REPRODUCTION IN CASTE/GENDER/LABOUR*

MEENA GOPAL

Feminist theorising on work urges us to go beyond the segmentation of the work of men and women into formal, informal and the domestic to understand the world of work in India, especially at a time when technological upgradation has created massive changes in the way the labour process is organised (Sen 2010; Banerjee 1997; Krishnaraj 1990). This segmentation renders invisible and undervalued the numerous subsistence and socially necessary activities done by women that take place within the domestic sphere, as well as the under-waged, often degraded work performed by women workers in the informal sector. Most of the activities and tasks performed within both the informal and the domestic spheres could be categorised as part of social reproduction, but due to their distance from the world of exchange, these tasks remain unrecognised and undervalued. The mechanistic distinction between the formal, informal and domestic reflects the artificial distinction charted out between production and social reproduction.

However, a significant aspect of social reproduction, as reflected in the subsistence and socially necessary activities done by women as well as the numerous degraded tasks performed by women workers in the informal sectors, also fall under the rubric of caste-based labours. Thus caste hierarchies, as much as gender hierarchies, contribute to the segmentation and devaluation of labour. Focusing on marginalised

communities' relationship to land and labour and the dispossession that they experience—summed up through displacement, migration and pauperisation spurred on by a resurgent primitive accumulation (Bhaduri 2010; Banerjee-Guha 2010; Samaddar 2009)—highlights the obscured social reproduction that these dispossessed people contribute to by their continual entry into the terrain of informal labour. In these times, there is an imperative to draw from both history and the contemporary to understand social reproduction, eschewing the artificial boundaries that separate and devalue gendered labour.

THE ABJECTNESS OF DOMESTIC AND OTHER SEGMENTED LABOUR

The devaluation attached to domestic work has been eloquently discussed in the context of the sexual division of labour within the household (Sangari 1993). Despite being absolutely necessary socially, domestic labour is among the most abject and exploited, and relegated to the most marginal women in society. Considered the primary tasks of women, its removal from the realm of exchange meant that it was absorbed into the tasks and duties of relations of obligation—such as marriage, service and nurture—within the household. Within the sexual division of labour, most of these duties of obligatory relations are performed by women or others who serve within the household.[...] Rather than focus on the exploitation and the lack of value that it generates, at certain historical junctures women and those who perform these domestic tasks are seen as the natural repositories of ideologies of selfless devotion, sacrifice and altruism—labourers of love! There is also a connection between domestic labour and other caste-based and bonded labour systems, which thrive on coercion exercised through ideological/non-economic imperatives. The location of domestic labour highlights the institutions

of marriage, family and the household, which are central not just to production (as in pre-capitalist societies), but to the organisation and regulation of social reproduction.

DIFFERENT WAYS OF CONTROL

When considering labour with caste status, the notion of untouchability plays a pivotal role in the commanding of compulsory labour and the existence of the enduring servility of Dalit castes in the most menial, filthy and defiling occupations, both in rural and urban areas (Velaskar 1998).[...]

Distinctions among castes are also embedded into the gradations of domestic labour, where work gets assigned the ritual marks of purity and impurity. These also determine the status of all the women who perform various domestic labours, which then establish the relations of upper-caste women with the labours of lower-caste men and women. In feudal societies, the domestic worker is an extension of the attached farm labourer, who is almost always from the untouchable caste. Women and children from Dalit castes form a large part of the domestic and farm labour within the subsistence economy of rural households, along with the domestic labour of women.

The connection of the abjectness of domestic labour with the marginal labour of women from the lower castes takes place—with both becoming sites of producing the ‘bad’ woman—when women do not stick to the socially desired definitions of what ‘women’ should be, when the patriarchal control over women fails to register compliance. Frictions within the domestic space, as also the interpersonal relations within which they are embedded, form the site where women contest household authority and establish for themselves certain customary rights. These contestations, which are mediated by domestic ideologies such as love, nurture and sacrifice, also

influence the valuation of their labour and the rights they access.[...]

Thus, the relegation of women who are marginalised into certain kinds of labour further reinforces their marginalisation. Connections can be made between deserted women, destitute women, widows, prostitutes, working-class women, women hired for domestic labour, migrant rural women, and low-caste women in caste-based occupations, even as the gendering and degradation are knit into the manner in which they are constituted as a segmented labour force. We see linkages here between familial and social patriarchies that continue to exploit women's labour and maintain the segmentations in their labour markets.

The differentiation of women as they enter or withdraw from the labour market is supported by the creation of a binary opposition between procreative and non-procreative sexualities in tandem with the earlier production of the bad woman within the domestic space, this time between good wives and 'others' such as widows and prostitutes, creating a hierarchy of marginalised labours, including caste-based ones. These other women form a pool from which a collective appropriation of labour and services is possible, and where sexuality is unfenced by marriage. This othering and sexualisation of women who laboured outside the home also consolidated class difference in the nineteenth century, when women who were either factory workers or domestic servants were deemed promiscuous or charged with sexual misconduct (Sangari 1993).[...]

CASTE-BASED LABOUR WITHIN INFORMAL LABOUR

A look at women in caste-based labour whose production processes rely on poor skills is telling. Technological upgradation and the benefits of modernisation remain out

of bounds of those labour processes that add value, but remain within the menial, filthy and defiling occupations. For instance, midwifery, manual scavenging and leather tanning are some of those labours which continue to be part of social reproduction within the domestic sphere and the informal labour market. It is not enough to state that large sections of women from poorer classes and lower castes and communities form the bulk of the labour in the lower segments of the labour force. What is required is knowing how this spacing and allocation of labour takes place, and the means that women have at their disposal to unhinge themselves from this bind. It is these interstices of assertion that help us to theorise women's breaking out of these low-end labours.

Various Dalit communities perform the social labour of the traditional midwife or *dai* as part of the sexual division of labour in villages. As a post-partum worker, the dai has an ambiguous relationship to her work. Other women who require her services avoid this work, even though they might know how to assist in childbirth. This can be seen as the social avoidance of defiling bodily substances, relegating the stigmatising labour to Dalits, who perform this caste-based occupation. But the midwife herself is able to break out of this perception: for instance, in childbirth, the most stigmatised elements are also evoked as the most potent, and cord-cutting is seen as severing a life source in order to establish a new person. The Dalit woman is seen to reject the notion that her work is polluting, and maintains her transactions in the realm of skill deployment and its valuation, demanding payment and preserving the domain of her work, however meagre the remuneration may be (Pinto 2006). It is important here to stress the role of the modern healthcare system, which has relegated the midwife to the fringes in a utilitarian capacity. At an earlier moment, when the state intervened to train and upgrade skills—including access to technology for traditional

midwives—and attempted to re-constitute their work, they only contributed to re-inforcing their low status in the social hierarchy and by focusing on notions of cleanliness, highlighted their untouchability. Their lower status within the health system was continued through their position as trainees rather than paid workers, and the use made of them to ensure family planning targets. Later, when the state laid stress on institutional deliveries and skilled birth attendants, traditional midwives were once again left lurking within the existing social relations of the village, where their labours were appropriated to fulfil the state's intent without any engagement with their caste-based occupations (Gopal 2010b). Thus, the state as well as social structures contribute to their continuing stigmatisation, despite their significant role in social reproduction.

Another sector that perpetuates the sexual division of caste-based labour in the most polluting of tasks without access to technology is the leather tanning industry, where even as the markets and export potential for the leather industry developed, non-polluting processes such as trading and marketing (which were also higher in the value chain) were taken over by the non-artisanal upper castes. On the one hand, the state and industrial elite appropriate the productive labour of artisans and lower-caste workers, but exclude them from the surplus generating enterprises, while on the other there is also the appropriation and displacement of the knowledge and skills produced by these caste groups (Prasad and Rajanikanth 1991). Even within the division of labour in the formal and informal sectors of the industry, women from the leather worker castes are found in the most hazardous processes of leather tanning. Although women and children are prohibited from being employed in the tanning processes, about one-third of workers in the tannery workforce are women leather workers, who are recruited through contractors, thereby invisibilising them within the labour process. Additionally,

the hazardous tasks, which are also arduous and polluting, include skinning the dead animals and soaking them in lime pits with toxic chemicals, and cleaning the waste of the skinned animals. All of this is done with their bare hands, as they are given no protective gear (Nihila 1999).

Finally, I draw attention to a caste-based occupation that is the worst expression of defilement and stigma: manual scavenging. It is the worst manifestation of the ideology engendered by the caste system, while also being a highly gendered occupation. Dalit women perform the most hazardous and informal of tasks, which are demeaning, but regular and arduous. The division of labour involves women actually lifting and carrying shit from the dry toilets onto baskets which are then dumped onto carts, which the men transport to the dumping grounds. Outside of the cleaning of dry latrines—which is now prohibited by law—is an ongoing struggle by the Safai Karmachari Andolan. Numerous studies point to the persistence of the practice of manual scavenging, where workers are not provided with safety equipment such as gloves or masks despite being employed by municipal bodies, and use their hands to remove human shit. Apart from cleaning out shit from dry latrines and cleaning water-borne toilets, they are also expected to remove unclaimed bodies and dead animals (Beck and Darokar 2005, 2007; Ramaswamy 2005). The modern economy has not just failed to integrate caste-based occupations within it, it has instead entrenched these. This is illustrative of a collusion between the upper castes and the state to keep the caste system alive in the new productive economies. The continuation of the institution of manual scavenging is rooted in the middle-class neglect of sanitation facilities in urban areas. While all urban infrastructure receives technological upgradation and huge investments, public toilets and sanitary facilities have always taken a back seat. The avoidance of excreta as polluting and distancing oneself from it is a privilege that

upper castes have arrogated to themselves, as they do with all other bodily fluids and wastes, be it placenta, blood or spit. Therefore, who else can manage it but those castes that anyway perform the cleansing of these polluting substances (Ramaswamy 2005)? In terms of technological upgradation, the Ministry of Railways has been the worst offender in perpetuating the system of manual scavenging with the open discharge of toilets, which require the excreta to be manually gathered and lifted off the tracks. A complete technological overhaul of the sanitation system is required if members of the staff are not required to work under degrading conditions, in addition to the reservation in educational and employment opportunities as well as a comprehensive rehabilitation package (Subramaniam 2010).

CASTE LABOUR AND STIGMA

[...]Discussions on exclusion and discrimination based on caste speak of the operation of stigma, where caste stigma works through institutional structures to exclude people belonging to lower castes from entitlements and status, as well as within educational institutions (Srinivasa Rao 2013). The stigma of untouchability thus reduces opportunities for advancement and continues the alienation of self, despite legal guarantees and mechanisms for equity. It is the experience of *relations of labour* as evidenced both within caste-based labours and the location of Dalit people in other situations that bring to light the continued structural operation of the stigma of untouchability.

In the case of the labours of women, we see a further complication of the stigma where the stigma of caste works alongside the stigma of sexuality. Feminists confronted such a moment when Maharashtra promulgated a ban on women dancing in dance bars in Mumbai, and thereafter in the entire state. While a section of feminists, largely from

the autonomous women's groups, opposed the ban, saying it deprived women of the right to livelihood, the fact that a majority of women were from castes and communities where dancing was a traditional caste practice led another section of Dalit-bahujan feminists to oppose the former's position, stating that in supporting the uncritical right to livelihood of the bar dancers, they were reinforcing the existence of the women within caste-based occupations and the stigmas related to it (for a detailed discussion on this troubled connection, see Gopal 2010a). That troubling moment further brought to light the fact that the autonomous feminist articulations, while responding to issues of communalism and sexual politics, had not addressed the experience of caste hierarchies and exclusion. However, the moment offered an opportunity to initiate some dialogue, which is still seeking momentum.¹

...[Narratives of Tribal and Dalit Women]

Speaking of life as a member of the Gondhali nomadic community in Maharashtra, writer Vimal Dadasaheb More narrates her own struggles, as well as those of her family, to educate her, even as some members of her family continued with the caste-based labour of begging and other hardships to sustain their upkeep, and some others took to informal low-end labours to break out of the caste-based occupation. These movements were not easy as family ideologies conflicted with individual struggles to break out of the structures of caste oppression; for instance, when her brother felt he would rather become a headloader or a construction worker in the informal sector, than take to begging as a nomadic. Later, the families close to her own took to selling pots and pans and old clothes as a means of livelihood. After her marriage to Dadasaheb More, she witnessed the struggles and mobilisations of men and women from different nomadic communities such as the Pardhis, Gosavis and Dombaris from the entertaining and

even 'criminalised' tribes, who were facing a crisis of survival and livelihood due to the irrelevance of their caste practices for survival in a market economy, urging mobilisation as social movements for education and change (Rege 2006).

Families of the de-notified community of Bedia depend on the sexual labour of its unmarried women. Ideologies of the good woman who selflessly provides for her natal kin help in maintaining the family economy, where women support their brothers and their families. Men find it hard to obtain jobs in the informal sector due to the seasonal nature of their search for jobs. Due to the communities' dependence on the earning capacity of women, there is no encouragement or effort to educate young girls, or train them in any other skill or vocation. The marginal location of de-notified communities in the social structure, the apathy of state institutions towards its citizens, and society's indifference furthers this familial discrimination. Family complicity in the management of the labour of the women who entertain men is at times difficult to establish, but is quite obvious in the case of families in rural areas where women use the same space as their family residence, and in instances where women engage in prostitution away from their families. In such situations, migration away from rural areas assumes significance in determining how women and their families negotiate the use of sexual labour, and how options other than prostitution are sought out by women. While migration is deeply implicated in the practice of prostitution, for communities that have almost no option apart from this, it offers an array of choices, be they dance bars, stage shows, or mujras. This women-centred migration of Bedia women also dispels notions of unilateral trafficking, and highlights the avenues that women seek out, given the limits of their situations and capabilities (Agrawal 2008, 2006; FAOW 2010).

In describing her life as a transgender woman from a Dalit caste, Living Smile Vidya compares the rigidities of the stigmatised labour of Dalits—from which it is difficult to break out of—with the rigidities of the work that transgender women are forced to do, such as begging and sex work, due to their exclusion from other options for survival. She feels that caste plays across even gendered existence, where the *savarna* transperson enjoys caste privileges compared to the lack of dignity of the Dalit transperson who experiences multiple discriminations and struggles. She suggests reservations based on caste as well as gender as a way out, instead of transgenders being grouped together into one category. She is emphatic that caste is alive, stigmatising and exclusionary, among even the transgender community! The stigma of a differently gendered existence is compounded by her caste status; even within the transgender community, she is compelled to conceal her Dalit identity (Living Smile Vidya 2013). Thus, stigmatised existence needs both structural and personal negotiations to seek a way out to survive with rights and dignity.

THE QUEST FOR AUTONOMY

Finally, the essay now turns to the troubled moment for autonomous feminist groups when the issue of caste-based labour emerged as an intractable and contentious issue. The moment, referred to earlier, occurred when feminists from autonomous women's groups supported the bar dancers' right to livelihood while the same was being opposed by Dalit-bahujan feminists as the re-inforcement of caste-based occupations, which most of the women in the dance bars traditionally practised as their caste-based labour.

Dalit-bahujan feminists see this positioning as an uncritical response from autonomous women's groups, who

have no familiarity with the histories of stigmatisation, violence, and the continued appropriation of the public labour of Dalit women. In fact, repeated and continual perpetration of sexual violence and atrocities against Dalit women, which are noticed as gendered violence but inadequately acknowledged as caste atrocity, is a case in point for Dalit feminists seeking to organise separately (Bhagwat 1995; Guru 1995; Rege 1998). However, it is also a fact that Dalit feminists who resist patriarchy and an oppressive sexual division of labour within their communities also seek alliances with other feminists in the larger struggles, insisting on a 'space within the struggle' against the onslaught of forces of capitalist patriarchy within familial, societal and state structures (Manorama 2008; Namala 2008: 464). However, at troubled moments, such as the one mentioned above, feminists from autonomous groups are deemed insensitive when their support to immediate struggles for the livelihood of women from marginal groups to strengthen their everyday negotiations and practices do not erase or shift historical as well as contemporary experiences of hurt, humiliation and caste subordination. On the other hand, there is also the need to revert the gaze back to reflect on the privilege of caste status in the locations that we as autonomous feminists inhabit, even as our articulation of gender subordination provides only a partial perspective.

Perhaps it is a moment to also reflect on the diverse trajectories of emancipation that feminists aspire towards and choose. While within mainstream Indian women's movements a generic tendency has been to challenge capitalist patriarchy within a broad socialist feminist framework, the efforts have largely been in terms of addressing patriarchal violence by holding the state accountable for legal reform, while simultaneously challenging other social structures and cultural practices. Additionally, a prime character of these feminist

articulations, at least in the contemporary mainstream women's movements, has been that of autonomy: from political party affiliation, from the state, from funding (to a certain historical juncture), and from families and communities, which are seen as perpetrators of patriarchal subordination (Gandhi and Shah 1999; Kumar 1999; Sen 1999).² However, this notion of autonomy has been both claimed and contested.

The earliest claims for autonomy came from the generation of women who, through education, tried to negotiate emancipation from their families and communities. These claims had to be fought for most fiercely since men, both nationalist and orthodox, believed that women were part of families and communities, and did not need to be treated as individuals. Most of these women were middle-class, upper-caste women for whom education provided a release from being just wives and mothers; it helped them to become autonomous and/or be part of the nationalist movement (Sarkar 1993). The feminist resurgence from the 1970s and 1980s, asserting a collective political identity of woman, with its grounding in an autonomous politics, was largely led by women from the upper castes and middle classes. While this unified category of 'woman' came to be contested, the quest for autonomy continued. Along with the struggle against patriarchy, feminists had always believed in creating spaces of collective camaraderie and support structures for women, so that women could seek out occasions, opportunities and spaces away from the confines of private spaces such as the home, its duties, and the structures of familial responsibilities, all of which erase and subdue women's resourcefulness and articulation of desire. The early efforts to form collectives were not only to seek relief from violence within the home and other problems, but also to create spaces of joy and celebration, friendships and

bonding, including expressions of sexuality. This was the crux of the definitions of female autonomy, including sexual autonomy, and visions of political utopias. The earliest radical socialists were often referred to as the first sex radicals, even prior to the sexual revolution spearheaded by feminists in the 1960s and 1970s (Snitow et al. 2009). They asserted that taboo, shame and silence were necessary products of capitalism, which robs sex of its creative and life-affirming radical force. They attempted to translate the liberating potential of sex and sexuality into class struggle. It seems that we need to recreate that space for autonomy, keeping in mind the knowledge of caste subordination from all standpoints.

We choose at this juncture to reflect on the claim mentioned above and on the contestation of the notion of autonomy. It is not as though Dalit and bahujan feminists do not claim autonomy from patriarchal structures;³ but in resisting and challenging caste oppression, there is a deep reliance on affiliations with the family and community. This is amply evident in the voices of women in the Phule-Ambedkarite movement (Kamble 2008; Moon and Pawar 2008; Pawar 2008). It is here that the mainstream feminists' emphasis on an all-encompassing autonomy suggests a blindness to the histories of caste subjugation. This has especially been the case in seeking collective responses between upper-caste feminists and Dalit feminists. However, this situation is further complicated and made contentious through the assertions of autonomy by women from even more marginal groups, such as the women in the dance bars. Caste and its bearings on women's lives and work takes centrestage, affecting the positionality and perception of each differently.

The quest for autonomy then needs to chart the distance from the burden that caste has, or does not have, in the lives and labours of women. Feminists from autonomous

women's groups need to seek out inventive spaces, traverse painful processes, face legitimate anger, and demonstrate enduring patience to cover the territory marked by contentions over caste-based labours. We can return here to the foregrounding of social reproduction that we began with: re-establish the connections between labour and caste, the de-valued nature of women's labour, and its intimate connection to all activities that lead to the regeneration of life, extending from the private to the public sphere.

Even as this task lies before us, we can pause for the moment by alluding to possibilities for understanding labour within a framework of transversal feminist politics, which relies on a dialogic space to advance our politics: using, for instance, this troubled moment towards a possibility of dialogue. The participants in the dialogic space bring in their own reflexive experiences of privilege, hurt, humiliation, and so on. Even while they remain rooted in their own location, they can also shift in their understanding and intention to act, beginning an active engagement (Rege 2006; Yuval-Davis 1999). It is only through such alliances and conversations, as also, often, silent attention that a feminist politics can move forward.

SECTION

III

Caste and Politics

RELIGION AND CASTE IN THE PUNJAB

*Sidhwan Bet Constituency**

BALDEV RAJ NAYAR

The reserved Assembly constituency of Sidhwan Bet lies in the Ludhiana district of the Punjab; the major part of it is in Raikot *thana* of Jagraon *tehsil*. The Ludhiana-Ferozepore road divides the constituency into two parts—one known as Sidhwan Bet side and the other as Dakha side. The constituency derives its name from the village Sidhwan Bet which was founded by the caste of Sidhus, the Bet referring to the fact that it is in the river area of the Sutlej. There are no towns in the constituency though a large market centre called Mullanpur serves the area. The main crops are wheat, sugarcane, maize and groundnuts. All the villages in the constituency are now covered by the community development programme. There are some historic Sikh *gurudwaras* (temples) in the constituency—places which had been visited by the Sikh Gurus—a fact of considerable importance in the political loyalties of the area.

THE CANDIDATES AND THEIR BACKGROUND

There were five candidates Ajit Kumar (Akali Dal), Gopal Singh Khalsa (Congress), Bachan Singh (Independent), Bir Singh (Swatantra) and Lal Singh (Independent)—running in the 1962 general elections from this constituency for the 154-member Legislative Assembly of the Punjab. However, for all intents and purposes, the main contest was between Ajit Kumar (Akali Dal) and Gopal Singh Khalsa (Congress). Ajit Kumar was the general secretary of the Punjab State Republican Party and, though not a Sikh himself, was

running on the Akali Dal ticket, and under the symbol of the Hand allotted to that party, through an electoral alliance between the two parties. He was born in 1928 in a Scheduled Caste (SC) home in Ludhiana City, though his ancestral village is Dhat which is a part of the constituency. [...]

Gopal Singh Khalsa, the Congress candidate, was born in a SC Ramdasia Sikh family in 1903, in a village which is outside the Sidhwan Bet constituency but not too far from it.

[Both candidates have been active in local politics and have been associated both with the SCs as well as the Akalis and Congress.][...]

CAMPAIGNING AND CANVASSING

The Akali Dal Candidate

Ajit Kumar proved an able organiser of his election campaign. He started his campaigning in the second week of January 1962 with a definite programme to visit the 170 or so villages at least once and twice if possible. He established offices at strategic places manned by workers with the members of his family playing an active role. His main strategy was based on the caste composition of the constituency. For the SC votes, he approached the SC panchayats. On his behalf, about five to 10 members from some 30 such panchayats went to various villages on foot canvassing for votes. In addition, there were four groups of workers on bicycles. Two station wagons were also used to carry workers to villages.

As far as the Jat Sikh vote was concerned, the campaigning was left to Akali workers, and the gurudwaras were the main centres of campaigning. All the gurudwaras in the constituency were under the control of the Akali Dal. The managers of these gurudwaras were active sympathisers and canvassers for the Akali candidate. The

Akali candidate and workers, when they entered a village, invariably headed for the gurudwara for canvassing, speech-making and for refreshments. On the other hand, the Congress candidate did not, or rather could not, go to the gurudwaras for electioneering. This was an avenue closed to the Congress candidate—though one active Congress worker remarked, as his station wagon stopped in front of the Public Relations Office (PRO) of the Punjab Government in Ludhiana, ‘You see, we use the Public Relations Department as much as the Akalis use the gurudwaras. This is our equivalent of the Akali *gurudumras*.’ Use of the Public Relations Department by the Congress took the form of borrowing entertainers and workers from this department.

Gurudwara-based Campaign

In the gurudwaras, when the people assembled for daily prayers or on special occasions, the priest or the manager of the gurudwara or a prominent personality of the area, appealed to them in the name of the Sikh religion to vote for the Akali candidate Ajit Kumar. One of the points which the Congress Party tried to exploit was that Ajit Kumar was not a Sikh. But in the gurudwaras and outside, Akali workers explained that what they wanted was to elect a member to the Assembly, and not a priest to the gurudwara. It was also pointed out that since the Sikhs were accused of being communal, they should elect Ajit Kumar to vindicate their position and prove that they were not communal-minded. But as far as the Jat Sikhs were concerned the appeal was made frankly and openly in the name of religion. With war cries of Sat Sri Akal, Akali workers asked the voters to vote for the Sikh Panth. In the speeches given in the gurudwaras, the sacrifices of the Sikhs were recounted, especially of Guru Gobind Singh and his sons, and the latter-day sacrifices in the cause of the Punjabi Suba; it was emphasised that now it was merely a

question of casting the ballot whereas in the past the Sikhs had to face bullets. If the Sikhs wanted to achieve the Punjabi Suba, they should vote for Ajit Kumar, because if Akali candidates were returned in large enough numbers they could just vote for the Punjabi Suba in the Assembly. In this connection, Ajit Kumar's jail sentences during the agitation days were recalled. Professional singers of martial music created an emotionally receptive atmosphere for the pronouncements of the Akali workers.[...]

The Akali Dal campaign was reinforced by posters from the Akali Dal office in Amritsar. These included: (1) an appeal from Master Tara Singh and Sant Patch Singh to vote for Ajit Kumar; (2) several pictures of maimed or dead persons in an attempt to depict the atrocities committed by the party in power; (3) a picture of the opponent of Punjab Chief Minister Pratap Singh Kairon in Sarhali constituency, shown contesting his election from behind prison bars; (4) a poster criticising the Congress government's cultural programmes, showing half-dressed dancing girls and drunken men; (5) a poster showing the Congress government as a demon-goddess, crushing people and civil liberties; (6) finally, a poster entitled 'old souls, new lives' showing Nehru with Aurangzeb in the background, and Pratap Singh Kairon with Nawab of Sirhind in the background (Aurangzeb and Nawab of Sirhind are the two most hated characters in Sikh history). In addition, there was an appeal from the son of Dr B. R. Ambedkar to vote for Ajit Kumar, emphasising for the benefit of the SC vote that Ajit Kumar was a candidate of the Republican Party.

The Congress Candidate

The Congress candidate's campaign was, in contrast, highly disorganised. Khalsa himself is a witty speaker, and could pour scorn and ridicule on the Akali Dal, its leader Master Tara Singh and the opposing candidate. But, in contrast to earlier elections, voters now wanted the

candidate to visit them individually at their houses. Large meetings no longer interested them. Besides, public meetings needed organisation. This proved a handicap because Khalsa had in 1952 run in a double-member constituency where the member running for the general seat had done most of the organisational work, and the candidate running for the reserved seat merely tagged along. Congress workers themselves were very critical of Khalsa for his lack of organisation. For one thing, he started late in the election campaign, almost a month after Ajit Kumar. Some of the Congress workers were critical of his practice of returning to Ludhiana City in the evening which was precisely the time to meet the voters who were in the fields during the daytime. They also criticised him for choosing Khushkismet Singh, vice-president of the District Congress Committee of Ludhiana, as his election aide since Khushkismet Singh was not liked by certain sections of Congress voters in the villages. These Congressmen said that Khushkismet Singh was openly working for his close relative, Shamsheer Singh Dhandari, who was running on the Akali Dal ticket from the adjoining Ludhiana South constituency. Congress leaders and workers in the area were generally disappointed at Khalsa's selection of people to accompany him during his campaign in the villages. He had chosen people who were anathema to many Congress-men. Moreover he had with him workers from the Chamar caste most of the time, with the result that he was unable to gain an effective entry into the Jat sections. At times he was even stoned and prevented from entering villages.[...]

Approach through Panchayats

Khalsa's main strategy, as of most Congress candidates, was to approach panches, sarpanches and landlords, and take them along for campaigning among other voters. It must be said that other political parties also approach

panches and sarpanches depending on whether they have their party men on the panchayats. A little more than 50 per cent of the panchayats in the constituency are controlled by the Congress Party, about 30 per cent by the Akalis and the rest by the Communist Party and the Republican Party. These are rough figures.[...]

Khalsa's main point of attack was that Ajit Kumar was not a Sikh and that he was a chain-smoker, which he indeed is (in Sikh religion smoking is taboo). To the Jat Sikhs, Ajit Kumar was presented by the Congress workers as an advocate of nationalisation of land and of industries, as belonging to a party whose founder, B. R. Ambedkar, was responsible for the Hindu Succession Act (which the jats opposed) and as an anti-Jat. To the SCs, Ajit Kumar was presented as having crossed over to the Akalis and having favoured the formation of the Punjabi Suba in which SCs would find it hard to live in the villages. The Congress Party, on the other hand, was presented as the protector of the Scheduled Castes. It is an irony of politics how roles can be reversed from election to election. In the 1952 elections, Ajit Kumar then campaigning for the SCF candidate against Khalsa, warned the SCs that the Akalis will 'finish them' if they came into power. Now, in 1962, Khalsa running on the Congress Party ticket was using exactly the same argument. Workers campaigning for Khalsa also dropped hints that Khalsa, because of his close connections with Chief Minister Kairon, would become a minister after the elections and that people should vote for him if they wanted to get their work done later.

THE ELECTION RESULTS

The election for the Sidhwan Bet constituency, as for the rest of the Punjab, was held on 24 February 1962. [The Akali-Dal supported candidate won easily, polling 23,567 votes to the 11,763 of the Congress candidate, with the

other three candidates put together polling less than 2,000 votes.] This seat had been won by an Akali candidate in 1952 (by Khalsa, who was now running on the Congress ticket), a Congress-Akali candidate in 1957, and now in 1962 it had gone to an Akali-supported but non-Sikh candidate. This testifies to the ability of the Akali Dal to swing the vote to any candidate of its choice in this Sikh majority constituency.

II

ANALYSIS OF VOTING BEHAVIOUR

About 30 per cent of the population of the Sidhwan Bet constituency belong to the SCs, the non-SC population consisting primarily of Jat Sikhs, with a sprinkling of caste Hindus and some OBCs. The Hindus are mostly shopkeepers and small-scale businessmen. Data on the population of Hindus and backward classes in the villages is not available, but on the basis of interview's some estimate of these will be given where possible and necessary. The Jat Sikhs are the cultivator-farmers who own their land. The SCs are landless agricultural labourers. They also engage in leather and scavenging work. While no figures are available, in the Dakha part of the constituency, about 50 per cent of the SC population is engaged in shoemaking, the other 50 per cent in agriculture, half of them being tenants and the other-half agricultural labour. In the Sidhwan Bet area, 75 per cent of them work as agricultural labourers, and about 20 per cent work as labourers engaged in digging wells, constructing roads or making mats and baskets. About 5 per cent or so are small landowning cultivators. Except for this last category, in both Dakha and Sidhwan Bet sections, the landowners are invariably Jat Sikhs.

Data on the population of SCs in the various villages was obtained from the Office of the Superintendent of Census

Operations (Punjab) in Chandigarh. However, it was difficult to locate all the villages which form part of the polling stations in the constituency, but data is available for a total of 58 polling stations—either by individual polling stations or a combination of polling stations (in case a village or group of villages are split into two or more polling stations). The analysis here will be based on the voting statistics for polling stations; one polling station covers approximately a thousand voters.

THE THEORY OF FACTIONS

One approach by Congress candidates in their election campaigning is based on what may be called 'The Theory of Factions'. According to this theory, every village, more particularly the Jat section of every village, is divided into two factions, resulting from a variety of factors in village life. These factions, it is said, govern the whole life of the village. At the time of the general elections, these factions align themselves with different political parties, characteristically one aligning itself to the Congress Party and the other to the Akali Dal. In other words, the voter's loyalty is not to any political party, or to a political appeal, or to a particular candidate, but to the local faction whose leaders can swing the vote to any party. These factions may switch their loyalties at the last minute; if one changes one way, its opponent will go the other way. In other words, the main determinant of the voter's choice is loyalty to the local faction rather than to a political party or candidate. To be sure, most villages are faction ridden. Even where panchayat elections have taken place unanimously, factions are present, because unanimity in most cases emerged as a result of candidates withdrawing after having been convinced of certain defeat—not from an absence of contest. However, if the election results of Sidhwan Bet constituency are any guide, the theory does not seem to

hold. It is significant that the Congress candidate could get more than 51 per cent of the vote at only two of the 70 polling stations in the constituency. At 25 polling stations, he got less than 25 per cent of the vote. Except for 12 polling stations, his vote at every other polling station was less than 41 per cent. On the other hand, except for 11 polling stations, the Akali-Dal-Republican candidate got more than 51 per cent of the vote at every one of the 70 polling stations.[...]

It is true that a polling station may include more than one village and the results would thus be distorted, but the election figures for those single villages for which data are available indicate the same trend, as will be seen from Table 16.1. If the theory of factions had been true, it is odd that the Congress candidate gets the smaller faction in the overwhelming majority of the cases. Data from the Sidhwan Bet constituency shows a majority for the Akali Dal candidate in most villages. However, the theory is not to be dismissed entirely for it does contain some truth in regard to those villages where factionalism is bitter, or the prestige of the leaders of the factions is at stake in the election. In these villages, each faction, whether large or small, does align itself with opposing political parties. On the basis of information available from interviews, factionalism in the village was influential in the following polling stations or villages mentioned in Table 16.2 (these examples are illustrative and not exclusive).

**TABLE 16.1: Vote Percentages for Single Villages
in Sidhwan Bet Constituency**

Name of Village	Number of Polling Station	Vote Percentage		
		Ajit Kumar	Khalsa	Others
Pamal	2	51.8	43.7	4.5
Dakha	6,7,8	65.5	31.3	3.2
Amargarh Kaler	30	78.0	19.6	2.4
Ramgarh	33	53.7	44.1	2.2
Bairsal	37	53.1	36.8	10.1
Talwandi Kalan	45	66.6	30.3	3.1
Talwandi Khurd	46	66.6	32.3	1.7
Mandioni	47	72.2	24.4	3.4
Raqba	50	71.3	26.3	2.4
Hissowal	51	66.5	29.6	3.9
Jangpur	52	56.3	37.2	6.5
Rurka	53	73.7	22.8	3.4
Khandur	54	62.8	33.8	4.0
Mohi	55,56	60.8	35.9	3.3
Tusa	59	54.8	42.1	3.1
Rattowal	60	64.7	33.6	1.7
Akalgarh	61	36.6	60.2	3.2
Boparaj Kalan	63,64	58.6	37.3	4.1
Jassowal	65	68.4	28.0	3.6
Ailiana	68	75.6	13.2	11.2
Horan	69,70	57.3	34.5	8.2

TABLE 16.2: Vote Percentages for Faction-ridden Villages in Sidhwan Bet Constituency

Name of Polling Station or Village	Number of Polling Station	Vote Percentage		
		Ajit Kumar	Khals a	Other s
Mullanpur	12,13	50.6	45.1	4.3
Porain	15	49.9	43.3	6.8
Sadarpura	22	50.7	47.0	2.3
Malsian Bajan	23	64.3	29.7	6.0
Tehara	24	68.6	24.2	7.2
Sheikh Daulat	25	59.6	34.3	6.1
Ghalib Kalan	27,28,29	60.1	36.4	3.2
Sherpur Kalan	31,32	62.9	33.4	3.7
Ramgarh	33	53.7	44.1	2.2
Lihan	35	39.7	57.5	2.8
Mohi	55,58	60.8	35.9	3.3
Boparai Kalan	63,64	58.6	37.3	4.1

SCHEDULED CASTE VOTE

An essential supplement to the so-called 'theory of factions' is that SCs—at least in the Malwa area of which Ludhiana district is a part—and the Hindus invariably vote for the Congress, when the choice is between an Akali Sikh and a Congress Sikh. The Hindus vote for the Congress because the Akali Dal is professedly a single Community Party standing for Sikh interests exclusively. The SCs are sympathetic to the Congress, it is said, because the Congress government has abolished untouchability, has provided for the reservation of seats in legislatures and posts in government offices for SCs, and enacted various measures for their welfare and advancement. Another reason is that the SCs form the underprivileged sections of the village, and come into conflict with Jat Sikh landlords. The Jat Sikhs are behind the Akali Dal and its demand for the Punjabi Suba, whereas the SCs are against Punjabi

Suba because of the political power it will vest in the Jat Sikhs. Consequently, it is said, the SCs overwhelmingly vote for the Congress Party. It may well be that Sidhwan Bet constituency is an exception, but a look at the polling station figures does not show any consistent correlation between the percentage of SC persons in the total population of a polling station and the voting percentage of the Congress candidate (See Table 16.3).

TABLE 16.3: Relationship between Congress Vote and Scheduled Caste Population

Name of Polling Station	Number of Polling Station	Percentage of Scheduled Castes in Total Population	Vote Percentage of Congress
Pamali	1	36.8	22.2
Dakha	6,7,8	17.9	31.3
Chak	11	31.8	10.4
Hambran	16	Not available	18.8
Sidhwan bet	21	16.9	50.3
Sherpur Khurd	26	23.4	20.4
Sherpur Kalan	31,32	30.6	33.4
Jandi	36	32.2	38.2
Sidhwan Kalan	41,42	24.6	24.8
Talwandi Khurd	46	17.3	32.3
Raqba	51	33.8	29.6
Mohi	55,56	30.3	35.9
Akalgarh	61	19.7	60.2
Sadhar	65	Not available	30.9

To be sure, in this constituency the sharpness of the contest between the Congress Party and the Akali Dal, as far as the SCs were concerned, was blunted by the fact that two SC candidates opposed each other with a resultant

division of the SC vote. It may be that the SC population does vote for a Congress candidate but only where the choice is between a Jat Sikh of the Akali Dal and a Jat Sikh of the Congress Party (in such constituencies, the Akali Dal candidates do not even approach the SCs, convinced as they are that they would inevitably vote for the Congress candidate).

More important, in this case, the non-Congress SC candidate though running on the Akali Dal ticket in fact belonged to a distinct political party which, in spite of its name—the Republican Party—represents exclusively the interests of the SCs. Moreover, he had worked in the constituency over a period of four or five years and had been able to build an image of himself as a sincere and dedicated worker for the cause of the SCs. It may be noted that even in 1957, when running on his own party's ticket in the Raikot double member constituency, of which the present constituency was then a part, he was able to secure 43.2 per cent of the vote as against the Congress candidate's 56.8 per cent, at a time when the Akalis were merged organisationally with the Congress Party.

In fact, the vote of the SC sections is full of subtleties, compounded of gratitude, fear, and revolt. There is genuine gratitude on the part of many SC persons for what the Congress has done for them. As one Ramdasia Sikh villager belonging to the SCs remarked, 'Guru Gobind Singh made a condition of these symbols'—pointing towards his beard—'before making us an equal of the other Sikhs. The Congress, however, granted us equality unconditionally'. At the same time there is a feeling that the SCs have got all they could get from the Congress, and that they have now to adopt other means and organisations to further their ends. The element of fear springs from the fact that the SCs can be subjected to reprisals—social, economic and political—if they go against the wishes of the local village leaders who come from among the Jat Sikhs. In the

Sidhwan Bet section of the constituency, many SC voters voted against the Akali candidate because, due to their own weak and dependent economic position, they accepted the leadership of the Jat Sikh leaders, some of whom were against the Akali candidate for his part in fighting for the rights of the landless agricultural labour in the past in this area. One Sikh villager was asked as to the voting intention of his village: 'We are going to vote for the man who is in jail.' 'But that is in Amritsar District, far from here.' 'Well, we are going to vote for the Panth.' 'How about the scheduled castes people?' 'They too will vote with us.' 'Why, won't they vote for the Congress?' 'No, we would stop their fodder.'

When the relations between the Jats and the SCs are bad, then the SCs vote against the side with whom the Jat Sikhs are aligned—and since in this area the Jat sections are, generally though not totally, inclined toward the Akali Dal—and since the contest is between the Akali Dal and the Congress, the SCs would tend to vote for the Congress. In Sidhwan Bet constituency, however, in 1962 relations between the Jats and the SC sections were by and large good, partly perhaps because of the realisation on the part of Jat Sikh voters that since this was a reserved constituency they had to work through a SC member in the legislature, and partly perhaps because of the electoral alliance between the Akali Dal and the Republican Party which in turn helped the joint Akali-Republican candidate. Something may also be said for the loyalty of SC voters to the leadership of the late B. R. Ambedkar, his party—the SCF—and its successor, the Republican Party. Khalsa who had been elected in 1952 from this area had been a close associate of Ambedkar, and Ajit Kumar who won in 1962 is the general secretary of the Punjab State Republican Party.

HINDUS, CHRISTIANS AND THE BACKWARD

CLASSES

Hindus form an insignificant part of the population in this constituency. But where there is a concentration of Hindus, this community votes for the Congress in the Punjab when the choice is between the Congress and the Akali Dal. This is obvious from two polling stations: (1) Sidhwan Bet, polling station number 21, where the Congress candidate received 50.3 per cent of the vote polled, and (2) Akalgarh, polling station number 61, (where Hindus constitute about 50 per cent of the population and Christians another 20 per cent) where the Congress candidate received 60.2 per cent of the vote polled. Data on the backward classes is not available. These classes consist largely of carpenters, ironsmiths and barbers, and are present in every village. While they were converted to Sikhism long ago, they are not completely accepted into the Sikh fold by the Jat Sikhs who consider them inferior Sikhs. On the other hand, they insistently want to prove that they are as good Sikhs as any other, and the act of voting becomes a form of self-assurance and a public demonstration of being a complete Sikh. They vigorously and demonstratively supported Ajit Kumar because he was a candidate of the Akali Dal and all staunch Sikhs were supposed to be with that party.

JAT SIKH VOTE

According to some, a corollary of the proposition that SCs tend to vote for the Congress Party is that the Jat Sikhs are unitedly behind the Akali Dal. A look at the voting returns for the Congress candidate shown in Table 16.5 would indicate that at several places he secured a higher percentage of votes than the SC percentage of the population. While part of this may be from other categories of backward classes, the evidence suggests that the Congress candidate did cut into the Jat Sikh vote, and that the Jat Sikhs did vote for the Congress Party. Precisely

what the bases of this loyalty are it is hard to say. Opposition workers attribute it to the grant of quotas, allocation of depots and other favours shown by the ruling party. However, there is a variety of factors involved, working not only in the case of the Congress candidate but also the other candidates. One of the most striking features of election campaigning by all candidates in Ludhiana district is the extent to which affinal and agnatic ties are used by candidates and their workers to put pressure on voters to vote for a particular candidate. These relatives help irrespective of their own political inclinations. The whole system of relationships is re-activated during elections. Daughters-in-law, for instance, visit their ancestral villages to win support for a certain candidate. Candidates depute special workers for approaching relatives. Past political affiliations do not make any difference, and helping relatives cuts across party-lines. A person may be helping two opposing parties in adjoining constituencies. While in this case the Congress candidate was a member of the SCs, there were always a considerable number of people who were interested in his victory and had a stake in it. Thus Jat Sikh leaders having ties with the Congress Party bring along other relatives and friends into the partyfold for voting for the Congress candidate.

Another factor is the past political history of the village. Villages which were strongholds of the Congress movement in the pre-Independence period find it difficult to break away from their old loyalty. Sometimes old Congressmen, torn between their loyalty to the old Congress and Nehru, on the one hand, and their dissatisfaction with the present Congress regime in the Punjab, on the other, just sit it out at home. On the other hand, the experiences with the Congress government may induce the voters of a particular village to vote against the Congress candidate. An example of this is the village of Aitiana where the Akali Dal

candidate received 75.6 per cent of the votes. This village was a prominent centre of the anti-betterment levy agitation in 1959 and witnessed a police firing in which a couple of people were killed, including a SC woman, and several were injured. The Congress candidate, because of the resentment against the government among the villagers of Aitiana, was able to secure only 11.2 per cent of the vote.

Again, another factor is the presence in certain villages of extremely hostile and bitter factions which divide the village in its voting. The voting here is an expression of hostility against the opposing faction rather than of political preference. Many Jat Sikh votes go to the Congress Party in this manner. Then, some vote for the Congress Party because it embodies governmental power. As one villager said, 'We voted for the British Government when there was a British Government; we vote for the Congress Government when there is a Congress Government; if the Akalis ever form a Government we will vote for them too. We vote for the Government, whosoever it is—not the political party.' On the other hand, it should be noted that the electorate voted overwhelmingly against the government in the Sidhwan Bet constituency. As a matter of fact, one could point to the existence of an anti-government sentiment. This is obvious from the fact that in 1957, when even the Akalis were in alliance with the Congress Party, Ajit Kumar could secure 30,011 votes as against 39,166 votes for the Congress candidate. Perhaps it may well be that part of the reason for the success of the Akali Dal lies in its ability to attract to itself this anti-government sentiment.

Still another factor influencing the voter's choice, though not in the case of the Congress candidate here whose ancestral village lay outside the constituency, is geographical loyalty. Ajit Kumar polled 85.4 per cent of the polled votes at polling station number 48, which included

his village Dhat. Similarly, while the election returns for the other candidates were extremely low, at Bhundri polling station (18) they went up to 37.9 per cent because that polling station includes, the village of Lal Singh, one of the other candidates. It was a combination of such factors that cut across ethnic and religious loyalties that enabled the Congress candidate to cut into the Jat Sikh vote.

CONCLUSION

What can we say in conclusion about the factors that made possible the overwhelming victory of the Akali-supported-Republican candidate? It can be said that, considering the composition of the constituency since there is no large town having a large Hindu population and the SC population is only 30 per cent—the candidate put up by the Akali Dal would have won, not only because of the religious appeal the Akali Dal makes to the Sikhs but also in its ability to marshal on its side anti-government sentiment. What made possible the *overwhelming* victory of Ajit Kumar was his own work among the SC population and his superior organisation.

THE SATYASHODHAK SAMAJ AND PEASANT AGITATION*

GAIL OMVEDT

I have argued (in my earlier work) that the non-brahman movement in Maharashtra represented a peasant-based 'mass' movement of the bahujan samaj against an Indian elite of intelligentsia and moneylender-landlords, the shetji-bhatji class. This hypothesis, however, is contrary to the prevailing view of the development of Indian social-political systems, which sees the process as one of a transfer of power from an urban-based upper-caste elite to an only slightly lower rural-based landholding 'dominant caste'. Instead of class conflict, the model most generally in use has been that of conflict between opposing elites.

Thus, for example, it has been argued that the non-brahman movement of Madras was 'no other than the movement of the later educated class who happen to be non-brahman against the earlier educated middle classes who happened to be brahmans' (K. B. Krishna, quoted in Béteille 1970: 278) and scholars have stressed that the Justice Party was simply an elite organisation of landlords, merchant-industrialists and professionals (ibid.: 277; Irschick 1969: 170-78).¹ Similarly, Ravinder Kumar's thesis of the 'rise of the rich peasants' holds that the non-brahman movement in Maharashtra represented the interests of this particular class (Kumar 1968: 254). Other scholars have tended to concur. Eleanor Zelliott, the historian of the Mahar movement, has argued that untouchables and non-brahmans drew apart... (Zelliott 1970: 14-15).

There is no denying that, given the substantial amounts of inequality in landholding throughout the colonial period, a stratum of 'rich peasants' among non-brahmans did exist. It is also true that this stratum, along with the educated class of non-brahmans and some merchants, provided the basis of support for the non-brahman political party (which must be distinguished from the movement as a whole)—something that was inevitable given the narrow electorate and conditions of parliamentary democracy. It is similarly true that important tensions existed between caste Hindu non-brahmans and Untouchables, particularly in the villages; although, for a time, the non-brahman movement did 'make common cause with untouchables'.... Finally, the Maharashtrian class structure today appears to present a clear case of dominance of a consolidated rich peasant class in fairly comfortable coexistence with the intelligentsia and urban capitalists.

But it would be a mistake to analyse this historical process in oversimplified terms. It is erroneous to read back the present structures of class dominance into the early twentieth century. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the 'rich peasants' did not represent a consolidated class with interests in conflict with those of agricultural tenants and poor peasants. Similarly, while rural co-operatives are an important basis of power of the rural elite today, Ian Catanach has contradicted Kumar's argument that they had a similar basis in their early years: according to Catanach, before 1930 co-operatives primarily served the 'middle' peasantry (Catanach 1970: 221-250). Again, while the non-brahman party did represent rural elite interests in the Legislative Council and the Local Boards, it also provided a basically democratic thrust that was in the interest of all non-brahmans and maintained a fair degree of alliance with Untouchables in the 1920s. To assert that the present class-elite structures were the determining features of the earlier movement is to take a

technological view of history. The position taken here is to the contrary: that the non-brahman movement as a whole was a mass movement, that it failed in terms of its full goals, and that the consolidation of a rural elite which tended to monopolise the gains of the movement occurred primarily after its failure and as a result of the inability of the movement to overcome the basic structures of the colonial situation itself.

To gain insight into the connection of Satyashodhak activities and non-brahman leaders with general peasant interests, this article will examine ... the involvement of Satyashodhak activists in a tenants' rebellion in Satara district in 1919-21...[...]

THE SATARA REBELLION

In many ways, Satara is a quintessential Maharashtrian district.² Historically, it was a centre of Shivaji's own kingdom and maintained a branch (deposed in 1859) of the Bhosle royal family. Geographically, it stands between Poona district, the centre of Chitpavan Brahman power, and the state of Kolhapur, centre of aristocratic Maratha power. Socially, it had the highest percentage of Maratha-Kunbis in the Deccan (56 per cent according to the 1931 Census), a representative proportion of brahmans, Untouchables, and 'allied castes', but no tribal population. It was in many ways a typical peasant district, and had almost no landlessness but a very high percentage of fragmented small holdings. Politically it has been a pace-setter for Maharashtra. If, today, Maharashtra appears to be a Congress Party stronghold, it is in Satara that the power of the Congress seems most secure, and it is from this district that the most powerful politicians in the state have come: Y. B. Chavan, who has risen above regional politics to be counted amongst the top men in the country; Vasantdada Patil, the president of the Maharashtra Pradesh Congress

Committee; and many other state ministers. If in 1942 the Indian masses responded to Gandhi's call for the British to 'Quit India' with an uprising that went far beyond Gandhian non-violence, it was in Satara that this resulted in a parallel government underground movement that swept much of the district out of British control.[...]

With regard to agricultural developments, Satara was on the whole typical of other Deccan districts; it was going through the same underlying changes that generated a high proportion of poor peasants by 1931. It was around the median in its proportion of good and bad crop seasons between 1911 and 1921, a period described as one of serious economic disruption (Mann 1924: 5). It had no significant canal-irrigated areas but, by the 1920s, some agricultural progress was occurring with the sale of iron ploughs, especially in the southern talukas.³ Among its distinguishing features, was its higher proportion of migrants to Bombay for work than from almost any other Deccan district, which may have aided peasants in maintaining at least some of their small landholdings.⁴ Because an imaginative settlement official initiated a village survey in his area in 1923, we have more solid details than usual on the agrarian class structure in Satara (Baskerville 1929; Bristow 1929). They have to be used with some caution, since most of the survey work was done after the tenant rebellion described here, but they indicate basic trends. What they show ... is a significantly high proportion of non-cultivating landlords (i.e. of land cultivated by tenants) particularly in the plains areas of the talukas studied.[...]

Who were these non-cultivating owners? Their caste is not described in the survey, but two earlier settlement reports described 'non-agriculturist' landholders as kulkarnis in one case and moneylenders and traders in another (Kothewala 1929; Bristow 1928). The *Satara Gazetteer* of

the 1880s had described in detail map of the larger villages and towns of the district, showing that, especially in the south (including two of the talukas surveyed and most of those affected by the rebellion of 1919-21), there were significant groups of moneylenders and traders, including brahmans and Marwari-Gujar moneylenders (ibid.: 447-616). As noted, brahmans in this district were characterised as having a propensity to invest in land, and it was similarly said that 'the bulk of the unskilled labour of the district is done by the poorer Kunbis, Dhangars, Wadars, Ramoshis and Mahars' (ibid.: 106, 190-91, 327). Since there was little significant challenge to brahman-moneylender power before 1920, and since it was almost universally held that non-brahman landlords cultivated their own lands (i.e., possibly with hired help but not through tenants), there seems no reason not to conclude that a very high proportion of the land—and of the best land had passed to outsiders who were mainly brahmans or Marwari or Gujar moneylenders. Formerly prosperous peasants were increasingly joining low-caste Mahars, Mangs, and Ramoshis, as field labourers or tenants on land they once owned. Some technological progress in agriculture and a slightly improved labour demand around 1920 would strengthen their situation somewhat, but only add to the tensions as they sought to recoup a little of their losses. Thus, it is not surprising that, here if anywhere, the Satyashodhak movement would take on the characteristic of a peasant rebellion.[...]

What actually happened was a revolt of tenants against brahman and Marwari (and occasionally non-brahman) landlords in association with the Satyashodhak anti-religions revolt, which went on chaotically for about two years from April of 1919. The testimony of brahman 'victims' in 1920 indicates incidents in 30 villages, mostly in the plains areas of the five southern talukas of Tasgaon, Khanapur, Valva, Koregaon and Karad, but other sources

mention different villages in other talukas, some refer to incidents in neighbouring Sholapur, and many more were undoubtedly affected.⁵ [...]

In terms of extent, then, the rebellion covered a substantial portion of the plains areas of Satara district. This makes it worthy of comparison with the more famous 'Deccan riots' of 1875, which covered 30 villages (and 'threatened' more) in adjoining talukas of the two districts of Poona and Ahmednagar and involved little more violence, but upset the British to the point of provoking a full-scale inquiry (Catanach 1970: 10-11), or even with Gandhi's famous no-tax campaign in Bardoli, which focused all the organising powers of the national movement on one taluka in Surat district (Bhatt 1970: 327-33). Thus an analysis of the uprising may afford insight not only into the nature of Satyashodhak agitation but also into the problems of peasant protest under British colonial rule.[...]

The process of rebellion in the southern talukas ... began with the arrival of Satyashodhak ideology via the tamashas which ferociously mocked traditional religious customs and brahman claims to superiority. Religious attacks were evidently part of all the events that followed: peasants not only refused to call brahmans for their own religious ceremonies, but also interrupted the brahmans own ceremonies, violated temples broke idols and polluted wells; according to brahman witnesses, they indulged in obscenities not only about the gods but regarding brahman women as well.

But the major thrust was economic.... Boycotts of land by tenants, as well as by the service castes (a traditional method of applying social pressure throughout India and one which was also used in the Bardoli rent strike) were attempted very early.⁶ But this eventually proved difficult to organise, given unity and firmness on the part of the landlords and the constant pressure of population on the

land which allowed them to bring in outsiders as labourers, something they frequently reported doing. Brahman witnesses claimed that their tenants were loyal, and that if they boycotted it was only due to instigation and harassment by other villagers. One, however, pointed out a deeper fact; though his tenants resolved to boycott, 'at the sowing time the tenants came and tilled the land. They had understood that we would file suits against them and the Satyasamajists would not come to help them'.⁷ The statement reflected a general brahman confidence in their backing by the courts.

Unable to mount a unified rent strike, rebels turned to other methods long characteristic of oppressed Indian peasantry. They harvested the landlords' crops forcibly for themselves, looted and burned houses, engaged in beatings; in five cases it was simply said that brahmans were chased away from the village. Further, three brahmans who had been members of municipalities, taluka boards and co-operatives reported that they had resigned due to harassment.⁸ Clearly, the rebellion was taking on a complex form and represented the surfacing of a general power struggle, primarily over tenants' rights and lands but also against brahman religious dominance and connected with struggles within co-operatives and in the district local boards. Thus isolated instances of tenant rebellion after the main outburst in 1919-21, plus efforts of non-brahmans to interfere with brahman-dominated religious festivals, were all part of this power struggle.⁹

In connection with the general power struggle, the poor peasants of Satara were for the first time able to get at least a degree of higher-level support. Brahmans had the advantage of a legal system that gave them full rights against their tenants and one that was further heavily staffed with brahman magistrates and clerks. Against this, non-brahmans could appeal to relatively friendly British

administrators, such as Moysey, the Collector who had a reputation of being friendly with non-brahmans, and Baskerville, who had testified in the Karanje case on behalf of the tenants. Satara, furthermore, had evidently the only Maratha deputy collector in the presidency in Duduskar, who had been involved in Maratha educational organisations and was accused of favouring the Satyashodhaks in allowing *tamasha* performances to be held.¹⁰ Elite non-brahmans like Bhaskarrao Jadhav were accused of stimulating the movement by their anti-brahman speeches at the Satyashodhak conferences; the fact that some of the areas involved were near Kolhapur state was obviously relevant; and there was reference by one Biahir in witness to a letter from Jedhe mansion in Poona demanding the inclusion of peasants in the district local board.¹¹ In general, then, the peasants could feel the presence of high-level support, though non-brahmans had by no means taken over the administrative power system of the district.

But as far as the tenants' rebellion itself was concerned, the elite provided some ideological impetus and administrative facilitation but no real leadership. The primary organisation of the tenants' efforts at boycotts, etc. was local, involving village people and to some extent the tamasha leaders themselves. There were, however, two Satyashodhak leaders of importance who were named as providing real organisation of rebellion. One of those urging peasant boycott and himself leading anti-religious efforts was Keshawrao Vichare.¹² Vichare, a Maratha from a poor village in the Konkan, had come to Satara Road (the railway station near Satara city, at the village of Padli) as station master in 1916, and had become a Satyashodhak member soon after that. Under his impetus most of the nearby villages were converted, untouchability was given up (at least to the extent of allowing Untouchables free run

of the village), and many of the peasants became enthusiastic Satyashodhak propagandists. Vichare was the main inspirer of Padli's tamasha organiser, Jotirao Phalke, and of its poet, Tukaram Bhosle. He propagated a particularly radical form of Satyashodhak ideology which developed into open atheism and an opposition to all forms of idol worship. In 1921, he gave up his railway department service and became active in organising night schools and Satyashodhak branches throughout the district; with an extensive network of friends, he was perhaps its most influential local leader and eventually became a member of the district local board and the chairman of its school board. He later made efforts to organise not simple co-operatives but collective farms; one attempted at Padli itself failed but another at Wanji in Thana district, an old Satyashodhak centre, is still in existence. Vichare, along with some other core Satyashodhak workers, remained aloof from the national movement after 1930, and in the 1940s organised an 'educational' programme that had a significant impact on the Bombay working classes. It attempted to build up self-reliance and mass leadership by training people to train others.¹³ In the 1920s, with the tamashas and peasant rebellion, he was beginning a distinguished career.

Anandaswami, an organiser of one of the tamashas involved in the rebellion, was the other important Satyashodhak leader, and in many ways is one of the most mysterious and intriguing figures in the entire non-brahman movement—and another who was involved in activities in both the Deccan and Vidarbha regions. He was a poor peasant from Ahmednagar district and was similar to other figures in India around this period who emerged as social radicals within the sadhu tradition.¹⁴ Like the Bihar peasant leader, Swami Sahajanand, who said that 'as religious robes had long exploited the country, now he

would exploit those robes on behalf of the peasantry’,¹⁵ Anandaswami took up the tradition of religious renouncers with a good deal of radical mockery. His very title, ‘Anandaswami’, illustrated this, since a non-brahman sadhu was supposed to annex the title Maharaj after his name and not Swami, which was reserved for brahmans. Similarly, he mocked the whole business in calling himself ‘Vedashastrasampanna’ (learned in the science of the Vedas) at all the Satyashodhak conferences he later presided over.

Anandaswami’s above-ground activity was in organising for Satyashodhak activities and in support of non-brahman politics, for which he undertook several tours in the early 1920s reported in *Din Mitra*. Underground, however, he is reported to have engaged in dacoity (robbery) for both nationalist causes and economic rebellion. This activity evidently embarrassed many non-brahman leaders who tended to claim that he was not really a Satyashodhak Samajist, or that there were ‘two Anandaswamis’. After his involvement with the Satara tenants’ rebellion he moved to Buldhana district in Vidarbha, joined a local leader, Pandharinath Patil, in a successful fight to capture the district local board and become a leading radical of the movement in the Central Provinces. In 1934, he is said to have organised a peasant uprising involving 34 villages in Buldhana, similar to the Satara movement; it succeeded evidently in driving out most of the local brahman and Marwari landlords who came back to the village only after Independence—under a more favourable regime.[...] ¹⁶

At one point, Anandaswami is said to have formed a nationalistic terrorist band of poor peasants calling themselves the Lal Dagliwalas or ‘Redshirts’. This failed because there was no national radical movement to connect it to, though he is also said to have had some contact with Subhash Chandra Bose. He is described as a charismatic

figure with a reputation of supernatural escapes from the police, and as an uneducated but clever man who at one point came to an old friend in Ahmednagar with a scheme for counterfeiting money for the movement. It was in fact his need for funds for radical activities—and developing tensions with more conservative non-brahman colleagues—that led to his downfall. For, after he robbed a rich patil in Buldhana, his former colleagues turned against him and he was captured and imprisoned by the British. Like Dinkarrao Javalkar, Anandaswami was one of the Satyashodhak leaders who combined cultural radicalism with organisation for economic and nationalist revolution, but in the context of conservative consolidation after 1930, he was more or less forgotten.¹⁷

EFFECTS OF THE REBELLION

Interesting conclusions arise from this analysis of peasant rebellion in Satara. First, there is the question of what we define as a 'peasant rebellion'—or of what is seen, by those of the period who control definitions of the situation, as a significant uprising. The Satara rebellion compares favourably in terms of villages affected both with the Deccan riots of 1875 and with Gandhi's 1928 Bardoli campaign. Yet, the Deccan riots, though not directed against the government, were seen as sufficiently threatening to invoke a full-scale investigatory commission and a revision in agricultural policy leading to the Deccan Agriculturalists Relief Act; they remain one of the most famous nineteenth-century Indian peasant uprisings. And the Bardoli campaign was both defined as dangerous by the government and as a model to imitate by Congress leaders everywhere. In the case of the Satara rebellion, however, the government had enough other worries and evidently felt secure enough with a modest alliance with the non-brahman elite to minimise the situation. And the brahman

elite, which still controlled the newspapers as well as the Congress Party, utterly refused to recognise the rebellion as anything but 'atrocities' committed against religion.

By and large, the non-brahman elite acquiesced in ignoring the economic implications of the rebellion. At an unofficial level it provided some inspiration, not only for Anandaswami's later attempts and isolated cases that broke out elsewhere, but also to some of the younger militants of Poona city. Mukandrao Patil was one of the few writers who openly defended it,¹⁸ and was partially involved himself with similar tenant boycotts. But the non-brahman party as a whole was too tied to upper-class rural interests to take a rebellion involving tenants and farmers as a model to imitate; for some time afterwards, party meetings and Satyashodhak conferences contented themselves with insisting that their movement was not violent.

The rebellion also illustrates the interaction of cultural and economic factors in revolt. Cultural interests of non-brahmans helped to provide some upper-class support that made it possible for lower classes to rebel in Satara. But the significance of cultural rebellion goes beyond this. While the motive of the uprising was at base economic, the special role of cultural tradition has to be taken into account. The power of an elite (and brahman landlords were the highest elite of India's traditional caste structure) is based on religious sanctions and long-accepted prestige, i.e. cultural hegemony as well as economic and political power. Poor peasants required a sense of right on their side and an ideology that rejected this status. It is no accident that almost all the other famous 'peasant' uprisings of the colonial period—though just as definitely based on economic grievances involving loss of land and deprivation—were either in cases where Indian elite leadership was available because the immediate exploiting class was

European (as in the case of the Bengal indigo strikes of 1859 or Gandhi's 1917 Champaran campaign), or were movements of tribal people or Muslims who had never accepted brahmanism (the Santhal rebellion, the Moplah rebellion of 1922). The peasant society of Satara was being disrupted by externally caused capitalistic forces, but because those who benefited first were the traditional elite, the fight against them required a revolt against tradition as well. And it was this ideology of revolt that the leaders of the Satyashodhak movement provided; this was how the Satara rebellion was seen afterwards by the leaders of the 1942 movement:

Such a revolution went to the lowest classes that a power of thought was created among them; the current of thought was available. Who can say that those who gave the power of thought and wave of progress to the majority class did not have a mass movement? Those who kindled among the innumerable lower class majority the light, and experience of who and what is causing us injustice, what are our rights, how we must throw away this injustice—these were the Satyasamajists!¹⁹

Finally, the Satara rebellion provides an illustration of the split between cultural, economic and national revolutionary forces in India. Most of the elite non-brahman spokesmen of the 'cultural revolution' ignored the economic rebellion their own movement had stimulated, largely because of their own economic interests. Similarly, nationalist leaders, still drawn largely from brahman and merchant castes, supported land movements directed against the government (no-tax campaigns), but consistently drew the line of movements against Indian landlords (no-rent campaigns); the result, for the national movement itself,

was a frequent dampening of campaigns and a reluctance to really draw in the masses.[...]

However inadequately understood it may have been, the results of the Satara rebellion were nonetheless significant. Politically, it played a role in developing non-brahman unity within the district. After the rebellions, brahman throughout the district instituted a series of 'chapter cases' (criminal cases against breaches of the peace, thefts, and the like) and non-brahman lawyers like Achrekar, B. C. Rane and Bhaskarrao Jadhav, moved around the district to fight them. There were a similar number of suits evidently over tenant rights.²⁰ Thus, while some non-brahman political power had helped to facilitate the rebellion, non-brahman political leaders in turn benefited from it. Further, the strength of the movement was later correlated with the 1942 nationalist rebellion, which was the strongest in those southern talukas of Satara which had led in rebellion in the Satyashodhak movement of the 1920s and which had as its leaders people like Nana Patil who were involved in Satyashodhak reform propaganda in the 1920s.

Economically, it appears to have had some effect in pushing the brahman and Marwari landlords off the land. [...] But no firm conclusions can be drawn about this.[...] What must be noted is that while such movements as the Satara rebellion could succeed in driving some landlords out of the villages or in slightly bettering the position of tenants, they could not affect the general economic processes that were producing the problems of land concentration and population pressure on the land. Without a general revolution or full control of political power, the Satyashodhak movement could not change the general rural class structure; it could only have some effect on who occupied positions within it. Hence, however strong the movement was at the lower levels, these general political and economic conditions meant that it could only result in

the general strengthening of the position of the non-
brahman elite itself.[...]

RAMASWAMI NAICKER AND THE DRAVIDIAN MOVEMENT*

MOHAN RAM

The founder of the Dravidian movement, E. V. Ramaswami Naicker, was the stormy petrel of Tamil Nadu's politics for over 75 years. He died in December 1973, a bare month before the expiry of his ultimatum to the Centre, threatening a final struggle for Tamil Nadu's secession.

During his turbulent political career which spanned four generations, Naicker was a daring non-conformist, iconoclast, atheist, social reformer and educator, he propagated rationalist thinking. Equating poverty with race, and race with caste, he founded the Dravidian movement to fight Aryan 'domination' which to him was synonymous with Brahmin domination and brahminism. His anti-Brahmin movement had elements of Jyotiba Phule's Satyashodhak movement in Maharashtra and also a secessionist content. Even after Independence, Naicker's movement continued to represent the strong Tamil reaction to brahminism as also the assertion of the Tamil identity vis-a-vis the rest of India.

I

Early in the century, the struggle between British imperialism and the emergent professional classes began with the demand for a share in administration. From time to time, the demand moved to the next higher stage—representative government, home rule, dominion status, and finally complete independence. Every change in the nature of the demand roughly coincided with the advent of

new classes and vested interests. The Congress, already powerful at the turn of the century, had a strong Hindu orientation. The Muslim professional classes reacted to this with their demand in 1906 (through the Shimla deputation) for a proportionate share in the administration as well as separate electorates. The Muslim League had its genesis in the Shimla deputation, believed to have been inspired by the British.

When the League was demanding representation, the Congress had grown into a militant mass movement. Swadeshi, boycott, and swaraj were its slogans. The British policy of 'counterpoise' seemed to work out successfully. Counterpoise meant utilisation and intensification of every cleavage between communities, castes and groups to the sole end of strengthening British paramountcy. The British wielded this weapon with unexpected success in their colonies. The problem of stateless Indians in Ceylon, the racial conflict in Guyana, the squeeze on Asian settlers in East Africa are some of the results of this game.

In India, the British added to the problem of minorities through the counterpoise weapon. The minority problem was bound to exist in a Hindu majority India. But the British tried to intensify the cleavage between Hindus and Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs, and Hindus and Christians. They also tried to intensify the cleavage among Hindus. What resulted from the machination immediately was a communal problem. The history of the communal representation is in the ultimate analysis the history of Indian middle class struggles for power and privilege. The political limits of the struggle were laid by the stagnant, semi-colonial character of the economy. The struggle itself was one of opposition to British rule and collaboration with it, between the earlier entrants to the spheres of economic and political power and the latecomers.

The Dravidian movement had its origins in the struggle between the brahmins who were the first to benefit from

English education in the multilingual Madras Presidency. The non-Brahmins were late entrants in the race. Education meant jobs in the government, which in turn meant political power and patronage.

Acceptance of caste and religion as determinants in a traditional society involved statutory recognition of communalism in the Montague-Chemisford Reforms of 1919 which for the first time transferred power in a limited field to Indians. But the demand for non-brahmin political power in Madras Presidency had taken shape even before the 1919 reforms. In 1916, C. Natesa Mudaliar founded the Dravidian Association in Madras. It aimed at non-brahmin political power—‘a Dravidian State under British Baj’ with ‘a government of, by and for non-brahmins’.

The Association was a virtual non-starter and a new body, the South Indian People’s Association, was formed to propagate the non-brahmin cause. P. Theagaraya Chetty, its secretary, issued the ‘Non-Brahmin Manifesto’ leading to the formation of the South Indian Liberal Federation (or the Justice Party as it was to be known later). Voicing the demands of a small social elite, the 1917 manifesto sought non-brahmin advancement in the face of the brahmin monopoly of education, the professions, and government services. The manifesto demanded non-brahmin reservation in the Legislative Council dominated by brahmins. Non-brahmins, excluding Scheduled Castes (SCs), outnumbered brahmins 22 to 1 and the SCs outnumbered them five to one. But the brahmins were a strategic group in Madras politics because of their hold over government services. The manifesto was an attack on brahmin domination and a call for the recovery of non-brahmin self-respect. It was also an attempt at checkmating the challenge to non-brahmins that was implicit in the brahmin cry for Home Rule. The non-brahmin liberals had to turn collaborationist if the brahmins were oppositional, ‘We are not in favour of any measure, which in operation, is designed or tends

completely to undermine the influence and authority of the British rulers, who alone in the present circumstances of India are able to hold the scales even between creed and class.'

The Justice Party, formed a year after the 'Manifesto', drew its leadership from the elite of the various contiguous linguistic regions (Tamil, Telugu, Kannada and Malayalam) that comprised the sprawling Presidency. The Justice Party leaders were anti-brahmin but were devout Hindus. In 1919, the Justice Party sent its own delegation to the London sittings of the Joint Parliamentary Committee on Constitutional Reforms for India. The Justice Party won the demand for separate non-brahmin representation in Madras Presidency, as part of an all-India award implemented through the Montague-Chelmsford Reforms. But there was a vital difference in principle between the award the non-brahmins got and others got. Muslims, Sikhs, Europeans, Anglo-Indians and Indian Christians who benefited from the award were minorities in relation to the Hindus. But the non-brahmins were a majority vis-a-vis the brahmins.

In 1920, the Justice Party won a resounding victory at the first election under the 1919 Reforms because the Congress had boycotted it. The Justice Party became the first real political body to function as a constitutional party in India because it had a majority in the Madras Council and enjoyed the government's support. A Congress victory would have meant a different situation.

In 1923, the Justice Party managed to retain office, warding off the Congress challenge, but failed to develop a mass base because it was essentially an elitist party. It lost the third election. In 1930, when the Swarajists boycotted the Council scheme, the Justice Party managed to come back, to be trounced in 1934. When the Congress rejected office, the Justice Party returned to power until it was defeated at the 1937 election (under the 1935 scheme).

During its years in office, the Justice Party's policies were clearly vindictive, aimed at curbing the influence and power of the brahmins. Communal rotation in government jobs was the Justice Party's idea. It reformed temple administration, again to the detriment of brahmin interests. During its two eventful decades, the Justice Party restored to the non-brahmin a measure of self-respect.

Though the British found the much-needed counterpoise in the Justice Party, its elitist character was bound to render it obsolete amidst the rising tide of anti-imperialism. It had a limited appeal to the masses to the extent it helped non-brahmin assertion against brahmin exploitation. But the non-brahmin masses were not only anti-brahmin: they were anti-British too. The political fade-out of the Justice Party reflected the growing strength of anti-British sentiment. It had a curious nemesis. Its loyalty to the British was a negative reaction to the brahmin domination of the freedom movement in the Presidency. British patronage put the Justice Party in power but the anti-British upsurge swamped it out in the end.

II

The brahmin/non-brahmin conflict in Madras Presidency extended to the Congress Party too. This was the corollary to a contradictory situation. Anti-brahmin sentiment was strident in the Tamil-speaking districts and this continues to this day. There was a series of bitter struggles for non-brahmin control of the Congress organisation in the Tamil region. The Justice Party leaders thought the Congress was the brahmin instrument of the future when the British pulled out, to exploit the non-brahmins as before. The conflict between brahmin and non-brahmin leaders inside the Tamil Nadu Congress Committee (between 1919 and 1936) lends credence to this theory. In the late 1920s, at the Karaikudi session of the TNCC, C. Rajagopalachari, a

Vaishnavite Brahmin, backed his principal factional rival Satyamurti, a Shaivite Brahmin, to defeat Muthuranga Mudaliar, a non-brahmin opponent. Voting cut across factional interests and conformed to caste configurations.

Naicker's own case underscores the conflict. Naicker was a religious mendicant and returned to his home town, Erode, in 1919, a convinced anti-brahmin determined to fight the exploitation of the masses. His anti-brahminism should have led Naicker into the Justice Party but he joined the Congress instead. He earned two prison terms for his participation in the non-cooperation movement in 1920. He became the secretary of the TNCC and incurred the wrath of its brahmin leaders by joining the Vaikom satyagraha for Harijan temple entry in the neighbouring Travancore state.

His disenchantment with Gandhi is attributed to the Cheranmahadevi incident. An ashram in Cheranmahadevi named after Gandhi practised discrimination against non-brahmins, especially the Harijan children. Naicker protested to Gandhi who pleaded his helplessness in the matter but would not disown the ashram. Naicker defeated a brahmin rival for TNCC presidentship later but before he could assume office, a brahmin leader successfully moved a no-confidence motion against him.

In 1925, after the Conjeevaram session of the TNCC, Naicker left the Congress to found the Self-Respect Movement, which was one of social protest against brahminism. It professed a vague brand of atheistic rationalism and therefore could not rally all sections of the educated non-brahmins who were politically with the Justice Party. But the response to the movement was overwhelming from the lower castes, especially the Harijans.

Naicker's campaign took the form of a crusade against caste-ridden Hinduism, the brahmin priest was the symbolic target. It was a revolt against the thralldom of ritualistic religion and the hierarchical structures it had

built, reminiscent of Robert Ingersoll's (Naicker had rendered him into Tamil). It chose to attack casteism which Hinduism had sanctified. Naicker founded the Tamil journal *Kudiyarasu* (Republic), and later *Paguttarivu* (Commonsense or Discernment) and *Viduthalai* (Liberation). *Viduthalai* continues to this day as a daily.

To the devoutly Hindu leadership of the Justice Party which belonged to the upper non-brahmin castes, the attack on caste was only a propaganda lever for concessions and privileges from the British. The Justice Party leadership was not anti-religious or anti-Hindu. But Naicker's movement went further, seeking liberation of the non-brahmin masses from the cultural domination of all upper castes including the brahmins.

The Justice Party secured for the 97 per cent non-brahmins of the Presidency a negative identity. Naicker sought to give them a positive identity when he described them as Dravidians, on the assumption that all brahmins were Aryans. His anti-brahminism had to be anti-Hinduism because the protest against brahminism extended to the entire Hindu order spearheaded by the brahmins.

Naicker returned from the Soviet Union in 1931 a fiery revolutionary advocating the overthrow of the government by violent means. He translated the *Communist Manifesto* into Tamil. His extremist politics landed him in prison for sedition. Freed in 1934, he was invited by some of the big landlord Justice Party leaders to take over leadership of the stagnating party, but on condition it should be an anti-Congress forum and not turn anti-British.

With the help of some of his colleagues in the Self-Respect Movement (including P. Jeevanandam who later became a CPI leader), Naicker drew up a 14-point socio-economic programme known as the 'Erode Path'. He confronted the Congress as well as the Justice Party with the unusual offer to join whichever among them accepted his programme. The Congress, being an all-India party could not respond

but the Justice Party did. Though Naicker took over the leadership of the Justice Party, the social reformer and anti-imperialist in him was greatly influenced by what he had seen of Bolshevik power in the Soviet Union. He threw out of the party the galaxy of loyalists and knights-errant of the British rulers.

Chief Minister Rajagopalachari imposed Hindi on school children as part of the Congress commitment to make Hindi the official language after freedom. To Naicker, the Hindi move was a calculated brahmin affront to Tamil nationhood, Hindi was Tamil brahminism's nest for the future. Their headstart with English had given the Tamil brahmins an advantage vis-a-vis the non-brahmins. Now the same advantage was sought to be perpetuated through Hindi.

After a strident campaign by Naicker (which sent him to prison), Hindi was made optional in schools. Back from prison, Naicker continued his search for Tamil identity in the context of the Hindi challenge he had perceived. His movement took a racist turn when Naicker asserted that non-brahmins of the south belonged to Dravidian stock and were ethnically distinct from the Aryans of the north.

A Dravidian state, separate from the rest of India, was Naicker's answer to the Hindi challenge. This is the origin of the first demand for secession in 'modern' India. In 1938, Naicker had no difficulty in getting the Justice Party (now a virtual Tamil party with the fade-out of the Andhra stalwarts and the death of T. M. Nair) to pass a resolution demanding Tamil Nadu's right to secession. The message of the demand was clear: the Tamils had no common destiny with the rest of India and even if the British would not grant independence immediately, let them be ruled directly from Whitehall and not from New Delhi.

Naicker called a Dravida Nadu conference the following year to demand an independent homeland for the Dravidians. The demand was reiterated the next year while

pledging support to the Muslim League's Pakistan demand at Lahore. Naicker expected reciprocal support from Jinnah but was disappointed.

The Dravida Nadu visualised by Naicker was based on a vague and contradictory formulation: it was geographically co-terminus with the Madras Presidency which was a multilingual entity (comprising the coastal and Rayalaseema districts which now comprise Andhra Pradesh, the Tamil districts which now constitute Tamil Nadu, the Malabar area of present-day Kerala and the South Kanara district of Karnataka). Thus, a large section of the Dravidian people who did not live in Madras Presidency and belonged to the Hyderabad, Mysore, Travancore and Cochin principalities were not covered by the demand of the Justice Party.

Again, the demand was not for a federation of the peoples speaking the four Dravidian languages. Nor was it a demand based on the cultural identity of the four language nationalities that inhabited the peninsular south. It assumed that the Tamils were more Dravidian than the Telugus, Malayalees and Kannadigas. Nevertheless, it was a significant demand to the extent it was the first demand for secession, preceding even the Pakistan demand of the Muslim League.

The break-up of the Justice Party became inevitable. At the 1944 Salem conference, it was an all-Tamil body. It split into two, Naicker re-organising the majority wing into the Dravida Kazhagam and the rump continuing to call itself the Justice Party to die later.

At the Trichy (now Tiruchirapalli) conference in 1945, the Kazhagam streamlined its organisation and was poised for take-off. It re-formulated the Dravida Nadu demand into one for a sovereign state, a federal union of the peoples speaking the four Dravidian languages. The demand implied freedom from British rule. The conference also

witnessed the birth of an egalitarian programme for a classless society.

Though the Trichy demand did not mean a united front with the Congress against the British, Naicker was later to discover his identity with the freedom struggle. He called upon his followers to renounce all British-conferred titles and honorifics and to quit the National War Front in which the Justice old guard was active. The slogan 'Wreck the British-Brahmin-Bania Triple Alliance' gained a new edge because the Kazhagam was demanding independence. It was by no means a new slogan because the Justice Party had advanced it earlier, in feeble reply to the Congress taunt that it was a stooge party promoted by the British. The slogan now sought to involve, in a subtle manner, the Congress (dominated by the brahmins) and Gandhi (who was a bania by caste), besides the British. It equated all three as enemies of the Dravidian peoples.

As the freedom struggle entered its final, decisive phase, Naicker realised that the British were in no mood to concede the Dravida Nadu demand even when they were about to leave India. So his campaign took a new turn: swaraj had no meaning to the Dravidians, Muslims and the Harijans. This was part of Naicker's attempt to find an identity together with Jinnah and B. R. Ambedkar.

The Kazhagam had grown during the war years. Naicker's crusade against brahminism gained new strength. Caste-wise anti-brahmin, communally anti-Hindu, it was by implication anti-Indian. When Independence was around the corner, Naicker made a futile attempt to get the Muslim League's support for his demand. To him 15 August meant transfer of power from the British to the Aryans and not the emancipation of the Dravidian masses.

After Independence, the Kazhagam continued to grow. Its campaigns included denigration and smashing of idols, and conduct of weddings without the officiation of the (brahmin) priest. Such weddings were known as 'reform'

weddings. In 1953, the Madras High Court held them illegal. Subsequently, the Special Marriages Act, 1955, validated them on condition they were registered under the Act. There was a lacuna here. While every reform wedding required registration, Hindu weddings with the officiation of the priest were free from this requirement. Not until the DMK ministry passed a law in 1967 was the lacuna removed.

III

After Independence the Kazhagam grew steadily though it lacked a political orientation and ideological cohesiveness. In the early years of freedom, the party witnessed intense personal rivalry between Naicker and one of his ambitious young lieutenants, C. N. Annadurai, who had joined the Justice Party in 1935 and had played a key role in forcing its split. It was in fact a conflict of generations. The younger following found in Annadurai a more pragmatic leader while the older generation looked to Naicker. The patriarch was stubborn in keeping the Kazhagam off parliamentary politics (to this day it has not participated in elections directly) because he feared it would degenerate into a power-hungry caucus if it accepted electoral politics with all the temptations it offered. The younger generation, however, believed in electoral politics based on adult franchise ushered in after Independence.

Annadurai's own personal ambition might have accounted for the differences with Naicker. For instance, on 15 August, he hoisted the tricolour atop his home when Naicker had called for a boycott of Independence. A little later, he deliberately kept off the Kazhagam's conference at Tuticorin. Sensing his ambition, Naicker tried to prop Annadurai's vanity by making him president of a special anti-Hindi conference at Erode. The differences between the two appeared to have been patched up but in fact the

rift was widened after Erode. The confrontation came over a seemingly non-political issue; in 1949 the 72-year-old Naicker decided to marry his 25-year-old secretary and dedicated party functionary. Annadurai opposed the marriage citing the wide disparity in the ages of the two and pointed out that Naicker had been campaigning against such 'unequal' marriages in the past. Of the 44-member general council of the party, 31 opposed the proposed wedding. Naicker ignored the resolution and Annadurai began rallying support for the new party he was to found three months later, known as the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK). The split was anything but political because the programme and objectives of the new party were the same as that of the Dravida Kazhagam. The goal was Dravida Nadu. Annadurai tried to foster the myth that the new organisation was not a political party in the conventional sense but a broad social reform movement without electoral ambitions. It talked incoherently of socialism and communism, quoting every thinker and leader from Socrates and Plato to Machiavelli and Ingersoll, Lenin and Hitler in the same breath.

As the first general election on the basis of adult franchise approached, the DMK was an amorphous quantity in Tamil Nadu politics with a vague goal—of a sovereign Dravida Nadu but no programme or ideological basis to give it content. The party was not sure of its electoral strength because most of its supporters and cadres were students who had not yet attained the voting age. The DMK eventually decided not to contest the 1952 election. On the other hand the DK was sure of its position. It was determined to keep off but was willing to support the communists wherever it thought they had a chance of defeating the Congress. Of the 15 communist winners from Tamil Nadu area of Madras state, 13 had been backed by the DK while the other two had won against DK-backed independents. Naicker's support to the CPI was based on

negative factors but the communists later chose to theorise on the revolutionary significance of this selective support—because it was a friend of the Soviet Union and China and the national liberation movements in Asia, and the like. All that seemed to stand between the two was Naicker's strident anti-brahminism and the question of secession, S. A. Dange said on the eve of the poll: 'On the question of anti-Brahmanism and Dravidasthan, we don't agree with the Dravida Kazhagam. But our alliance will bring it closer to the proletarian leadership which will ultimately change these features for the good of both the parties and the people as a whole.'

But the informal CPI-DK alliance was not fated to survive the elections. The CPI could not equivocate on the Dravida Nadu issue any longer and had to denounce secessionism. Though Naicker charged the communists with secret attempts to convert the DK branches into CPI units and cited this as the reason for the break, the main irritant was the alleged brahmin domination of the CPI.

The physiognomy of Madras politics changed with the formation of Andhra in 1953. At the 1952 election, the Congress had been routed in the Telugu and Malayalam areas. The Congress, however, had won 130 of the 190 seats from the Tamil areas in a 375-member House. With the support of defectors and splinter groups, C. Rajagopalachari could form a ministry. With 140 assembly seats going to the new Andhra state, Kamaraj, the party strongman in Tamil Nadu no longer needed Rajagopalachari's help to keep the party in power in a truncated Madras State. Rajagopalachari's controversial education scheme provided the opening for Kamaraj to rally support against his old factional rival. Rajagopalachari resigned on 'health' grounds and Kamaraj took over as Chief Minister of Madras State.

Kamaraj knew he had to face the challenge of the two Dravidian parties in the Tamil districts. They could

manipulate the Tamil national sentiment in his favour if they accepted him as the leader Kamaraj took care not to include any brahmin in his cabinet initially and launched a conscious anti-brahmin policy in education and public administration. Naicker was outspoken in his enthusiastic recognition of Kamaraj's Dravidian bonafides (Kamaraj was a non-brahmin belonging to an oppressed caste). There was a virtual coup inside the Congress at all levels. DK workers and leaders began blossoming overnight into Congressmen while the DMK looked bewildered. Later the DMK joined the Kamaraj bandwagon and openly backed him in a by-election where he was opposed by the CPI.

The Tamil Nadu Congress, after this coup, acquired a 'Dravidian' complexion, Rajagopalachari and the brahmins in general having been effectively sidelined. Though the Kamaraj old-guard continued to provide the leadership, Tamil language chauvinism and casteist pressures including militant anti-brahminism were being worked up inside the Congress. For instance, blatantly secessionist textbooks could find their way into government-aided schools until the Centre put its foot down in 1963.

Naicker's formal *detente* with Kamaraj which began in 1954 ended with the DK's call to burn the national flag on 1 August 1955 to protest against the imposition of Hindi. But the detente continued informally because Naicker took care to emphasise that the campaign was aimed against the Centre and not Kamaraj. When Kamaraj lashed out against the campaign, Naicker put it off. The CPI denounced it and the DMK discreetly kept out of it. Naicker found a new form of protest—burning the Constitution which he held to be an illegal document because it had been drawn up by a Constituent Assembly not elected on the basis of adult franchise and because the Tamils had no say in it. Kamaraj had to crack down on the DK most reluctantly.

Naicker carried on regular crusades against Hindi and brahmin domination but the clandestine DK-Congress

alliance continued through the 1957 election in which the DMK made its debut. The DK did not contest the election but openly backed the Congress, determined to defeat the DMK. Some of the DK functionaries contested as Congress candidates.

After 1957, the DK's decline was steady. The DMK emerged in some strength at the 1962 election and spearheaded the anti-Hindi agitation in 1965 when Hindi became the sole official language of the Union and swept to a landslide victory in 1967, to retain office at the 1971 elections. On the eve of the 1971 election, Naicker who had now begun to support the DMK, staged a rally to denigrate the images of Hindu gods in the name of fighting superstitious beliefs and considerably embarrassed the DMK.

Naicker's persistent campaign for the secession of Tamil Nadu (the DMK had given up its secessionist demand when the 16th Constitution Amendment Bill was passed in 1963 to contain the secessionist threat from the DMK) continued till his death and the DMK found itself greatly embarrassed. Indira Gandhi charged the DMK with abetting Naicker's secessionist campaign while professing to have given up its own secessionist demand. The DMK could not denounce Naicker on any issue. In fact, the DMK today claims the Naicker legacy with great pride.

IV

Naicker was a complex political phenomenon, like the secessionist movement he institutionalised. With his death, the Dravida Kazhagam might softpedal his secessionist plank, to save the DMK a great deal of embarrassment. But the fact remains that politics in Tamil Nadu has a distinctively separatist—though not secessionist—content directly traceable to Naicker. Tamil Nadu continues to defy the pattern of national politics and will do so in the

foreseeable future. For the Congress Party is not even a third force in the state.

Over the years, the split in the Dravida Kazhagam, resulting in the formation of DMK followed by the formation of the ADMK as a result of yet another split, fragmented the Dravidian movement but did not liquidate it. Neither the DMK nor the ADMK is a secessionist party in the formal sense. Both are, however, separatist, in the sense that they underline Tamil identity vis-a-vis the rest of the country. The Congress (O) in Tamil Nadu is no less separatist, though technically it is part of an all-India party.

Politics in Tamil Nadu has maintained its separatist character even outside the Dravidian politics originated by Naicker. The Congress (O) which is a formidable force in the state has been distinct from the Congress (O) in the rest of the country, if only because it provided the alternative focus to the DMK at the 1971 polls, when the ADMK was not born. The Congress headed by Indira Gandhi was obliged to come to terms with the Congress (O) only in the Tamil region (Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry in 1974).

Since 1952, every major political force in Tamil Nadu (the CPI, the Congress and the DMK) have benefited from the Dravida Kazhagara or its offshoots—the CPI at the 1952 polls from the DK, the Congress at the 1957 and 1962 elections from the DK, the CPI(M) from the DMK in 1967, and the Congress and the CPI from the DMK at the 1971 polls. Politics in Tamil Nadu has thus continuously maintained a separatist tendency and a separatist identity. The viable alternative to the DMK today is the ADMK which is separatist though not secessionist (like the DMK itself) or the Congress (O).

The failure of the CPI and the CPI(M) to understand the national question in Tamil Nadu has much to do with the emergence of separatist politics there. Before Independence, the Tamil Nadu communists, subordinate to

an all-India leadership, never understood the national question or its corollary, the language question in Tamil Nadu. The CPI settled for the Congress' national chauvinism on both these issues while the CPI(M), formed in 1964, discovered the mistake too late in the day. For instance, when the Official Language (Amendment) Bill was passed in Parliament in 1967, the CPI identified itself with the Congress while the CPI(M) was closest to the DMK.

In the context of Tamil Nadu politics, Naicker was at once an anti-imperialist patriot, and anti-Hindi crusader who underlined Tamil separatism, a rationalist and a non-conformist who equated caste struggle with class struggle which was per se un-Marxist. Much as the dynamics of his movement was incomprehensible to the orthodox Marxists and their party ideologues, it did not inhibit the communists from making use of his following at more than one point in the history of electoral politics. Even an integrationist and anti-secessionist force like the Congress found his support welcome somewhere along the way. Naicker needs to be assessed in some detail if only because his politics still matters albeit in one part of the country.

ANTI-RESERVATION AGITATION AND
THE STRUCTURE OF GUJARAT SOCIETY*

I. P. DESAI

The agitation in Gujarat started as an agitation against reservation of seats at the post-graduate level in the medical faculty for the Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs) and Socially and Educationally Backward Castes or Classes (SEBCs). The last category covers 82 communities, including some Muslim communities. This category became eligible for educational and job reservations similar to the SC and ST only recently, in July-August 1980. They are therefore not sufficiently conscious of their rights. The total percentage of reservations for all these categories, accounting for not less than 60 per cent of the state's population, comes to 26 per cent; for the remaining 40 per cent or less, 75 per cent of the seats are unreserved or open.

These seats are anyway conventionally 'reserved' for the upper castes, some castes below them and other religious communities. The SC, ST and SEBC are not permitted to compete for the 75 per cent seats filled by open competition based on the prevailing criteria of merit. In addition there are in-built reservations in the structure of society and of the medical profession. These begin to operate from the time of the examinations which lead to the medical courses, by way of the ability to bear the expenses of medical education and the ability to manipulate examination results. Then there are also the 'donors' seats in some colleges. It needs to be found out how much larger or smaller the number of such seats is than the seats for

SC, ST and SEBC on a reservation basis. The students on the donor's seats require a minimum percentage of marks to gain admission to medical course. But an SC or ST student cannot get admission to medical courses if he has not obtained a minimum 50 per cent marks. It would also be interesting to know the academic records at the school and the high school level of those upper-caste sons and daughters of established medical practitioners who have sought admissions through open competition, it should be noted that the minimum percentage of marks for passing the MBBS examination is 50, and the maximum percentage obtained normally is around 65. Large numbers of those who pass obtain between 55 and 60 per cent. It should also be seen whether the SC, ST and SEBC students who get admission on reserved seats have obtained just 50 per cent or whether they have obtained higher marks. If the reserved caste students obtain a bare 50 per cent or a little more in spite of structural disabilities, are they to be considered less meritorious than those who are structurally better placed and score a little higher percentage of marks? The structural disabilities include also humiliations at the hands of the higher caste students and teachers on the campus. There is an instance in the medical faculty of an SC student scoring high percentage of marks in previous examination, and failing in the first year of MBBS examination, but passing smoothly after he got his surname changed into that of a higher caste. Subsequently, he stood first in surgery at the final examination. Another Dalit student who would have easily got admission in open competition was compelled to take admission on a reserved seat. At interviews these students in the reserved categories are told to their face that they should become Bhangis and not doctors. The SC/ST student in the medical faculty takes the same examination that a non-SC/ST student takes and there are no special considerations for

his passing. Among the medicos themselves manipulation at the examination is a common topic of talk.

To return to the agitation. On 31 December 1980, a memorandum was sent by the representative body of some students of BS Medical College, Ahmedabad, to the ministry of health of Gujarat government. The memorandum made following demands:

1. Immediate abolition of roster system,
2. Abolition of carry forward system,
3. Reduction of the number or reserved seats in the post-graduate level,
4. Increase in the number of unreserved seats at the post-graduate level.

The first demand is still to be settled, though it remains to be seen to whose advantage. The total number of seats at the post-graduate level are limited—and have to be limited—because of the capital and the maintenance expenditure and also because of the fear of competition in the profession at the level of consultants, who have the say in the determination of the number of seats. Of course, the reasons given are the standards, efficiency, proficiency and the danger to the life of people.

Since the seats are limited a roster of unreserved and reserved seats is kept according to which the seats in particular departments or specialisations are reserved each year for SC/ST. This becomes necessary because those in charge of allocating post-graduate seats would allocate those departments to SC and ST for which there is not much demand by non-SC/ST students. The SC/ST students rarely got chance to specialise in the 'reputable' and money spinning subjects. It is interesting to note, in this context, that the complaint of the Indian medical students in Britain used to be that they were admitted in Psychiatry and not more 'reputable' subjects. The counterpart of British

medical profession in India is doing the same thing to the SC and ST students. Sometimes the seats are allotted to such colleges which neither has a department nor teachers. For example, the radiology seat is allocated to Surat Medical College where it is not taught. It is because of such shameful practices that the roster system was introduced and the SC and ST students demand its continuance. The abolition of the system will go against the SC and ST. The proper course is to increase the total number of seats and seats in the subjects in demand. But a larger number of doctors with post-graduate degrees means greater competition which those who are already specialists will not like. The third and fourth demands of the students are to be seen in this context.

The third demand is for the reserved seats at post-graduate level to be reduced and the fourth for the unreserved seats to be increased. If the reserved seats are reduced, the percentage of unreserved seats goes up as also the number, the total seats remaining the same; and if the unreserved seats are increased and the percentage of reservation is kept the same, the number of reserved seats will go down. Put simply, the demands mean that both the number and percentage of SC/ST students at post-graduate level should be reduced and only the left-over seats should be made available to them.

The mischief of such demands becomes obvious when we take into account the fact that in practice the specified percentage and number of SC/ST student is not reached. This year there were only seven SC/ST applicants for the 17 seats in the post-graduate courses. In 1979-80, the SC and ST students in medical courses filled 507 out of a total of 4,500 seats. According to their percentage in the state's population (21), the number should have been 945. Out of the total 106 professors in the medical colleges in Gujarat, only one belongs to the SC. Among 293 assistant professors there are only five SCs, and out of the total 237 tutors 15

are from SC and two are from ST. Thus, out of total 742 teaching positions only 22 are held by SCs and two by STs. How can one SC professor and one SC associate professor and 5 assistant professors, out of a total of 505 teachers bring down the 'standard of teaching'? If indeed the 'standards' have fallen, it must be due to the high caste/class teachers.

The figures cited above show that there was no issue; yet, government tried to meet the demands of the upper-caste medicos even these were against the interests of SC/ST students. The government abolished the carry forward system by an immediate order. Contrary to what is generally propagated, the unfilled seats were to accumulate only up to 45 per cent and a fresh list of unfilled seats was to be made every two years even if the percentage of unfilled seats did not reach 45. In addition, government declared that the system of inter-changeability of seats would be abolished. According to this system, if there were vacant ST seats and if there were more applications from SC or SEBC, the seats would go to them, but without crossing the limits set—13 per cent of ST and 25 per cent of total reservations. This concession was theoretically a little unfair to the SC/ST, for in practice the SC, ST or SEBC did not reach its own percentage and the question of inter-changeability did not arise. Further, the government also agreed to add one seat to the open seats for each SC seat filled in the specialised department. None of these concessions was in favour of the reserved castes. The non-SC/ST students had everything to gain and nothing to lose. Yet, they rejected all these concessions and made an issue of reservations, obviously for reasons non-academic.

Having rejected all these concessions the students put up another demand for the abolition of all reservations at all stages—jobs, educational institutions, the whole lot. This was not unexpected because through the press the

propaganda against reservations as such was going on. The four demands were made on 31 December 1980; and just two weeks later, by 14 January, they were demanding abolition of all reservations. The swiftness with which the demand was raised and a separate committee for abolition of all reservations was formed is significant.

The demand for total abolition of reservations has also further clarified the nature of the agitation. The nature of the struggle can be better understood by asking who the parties are fighting, what they are fighting for and what weapons they are using.

As the medicos put forth the demand for the abolition of all reservations, they were supported by all those who believed that they had been affected adversely by reservations—employees. In government and semi-government establishments, nationalised banks, the Life Insurance Corporation, etc. Support was also extended by those in the professions like lawyers, university teachers and others. The general intelligentsia was also for the abolition of reservations on the ground that reservations go against the interests of individuals who rise by their merits. Business and industrial organisations, while not directly and openly supporting the demand urged that the agitation should be peaceful, knowing fully well that the agitation was not peaceful and would not remain peaceful merely because of their appeal.

The most important allies of the anti-reservationists were, however, the landowning agricultural classes and castes who took the lead in perpetrating atrocities and creating terror among the SC not only in the rural areas but also in the urban areas. Sections of the SC population have already responded to this terror by the spirit of resistance.

Among the political parties, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and the Communist Party of India (CPI) have opposed the agitation and supported reservations. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) too has supported reservations

but has criticised the government for bad implementation of the policy. It has also appealed for an end to the agitation. All other parties have remained silent waiting for the opportunity to make political capital. The Congress (I) government has done the inevitable under such circumstances; it has used force, though the repression cannot be justified. In the beginning the police took every opportunity to repress the SC; but later it began to be oppressive against others too, particularly after a policeman was killed in a higher caste locality. But the police as a category are against the SC and ST. Only that section of Congress (I) which has a base in the SC, ST and SEBC has tried to explain to them the implications of the agitation. But by and large the Congress (I) organisation has remained a spectator.

Equally significant is the ineffectiveness of the Gandhian leaders some of whom have remained silent on the atrocities perpetuated on Gandhi's Harijans. Among the Sarvodayist Gandhians some have opposed the agitation, rebutted the arguments against reservations and have organised prayer meetings.

On the other side of the battle front were the government, the generalised target of attacks for the anti-reservationists, and the SC, ST and SEBC, the beneficiaries of reservations to the extent of 7 per cent, 13 per cent and 5 per cent respectively. But the only target of violence has been the SC both in urban and rural areas. Until the time the government and other employees declared they would go on strike from 25 March 1981, the unity of these beneficiaries of reservations was very thin, and even now it is not as widespread and deep as it could be. But all the three are against the anti-reservationists.

The geographical spread of agitation is wide, but it is most intense in the three districts of Kheda, Ahmedabad and Mehsana in north Gujarat. In Vadodara district it is confined to Vadodara city and to the nearby town of Dabhoi

and is largely against the government. In south Gujarat it becomes less intense against the untouchables as we move from Vadodara to Bharuch and Surat and Valsad districts. In the last two districts, the agitation has been against the government only and not against the ex-Untouchables. In Saurashtra, it is mostly confined to cities like Jamnagar, Junagadh and Bhavnagar. The rural areas in Saurashtra and Kutch are relatively unaffected; whatever agitation there has been is against government and not against SC in Saurashtra, Kutch, Surat and Valsad districts.

Of the three categories of beneficiaries of reservations, only the SC has been made the target. They have suffered heavily in terms of life, personal injuries and destruction of houses and household possessions, both in urban and rural areas, at the hands of both the high-caste Hindus and the police.

The high-caste Hindus in Ahmedabad have also suffered at the hands of police, though not in the beginning of the agitation. The high-caste Hindus in collaboration with the police were attacking the SC in the beginning. But the police began attacking the high-caste Hindus after a policeman on duty was killed by the high-caste people in the walled city.

So far as the castes are concerned, Brahmins, Banias, Patidars and the intermediate castes have participated both against the SC and the police. In the rural areas, the agriculturists or the landholding Kanbi Patidars in Kheda, Ahmedabad and Mehsana were in the forefront. Usually the Baria Kshatriyas in Kheda district and Thakors in Mehsana district are used by the patidars against the SC and the Muslims. This time they did not oblige them except once in Ahmedabad. At one place in Ahmedabad the Wakhris who are SEHC joined the Hindus in attacking the SC. Similarly only once in the beginning did the Thakors attack the SC but ceased after they were made conscious of the fact that they belong to SEBC and that the agitation was against

their interests also. It should be noted that these are also the districts of concentration of SC population and of the better educated among them, who have developed the spirit of insistence.

From the foregoing pages we may now make a few general observations:

1. The specific demands of the post-graduate medical students had become a non-issue during the course of the negotiations with the government. But a general issue of 'abolish all reservations' anywhere and everywhere was put forth so that the agitation could continue and the employees from government and semi-government establishments could join them. That succeeded up to a point. But the support that the slogan, 'Abolish All Reservations Everywhere', got is also indicative of the resentment of the classes and castes affected by the policy of reservations.
2. The castes and classes involved in the action were the high castes and the intermediate castes below them irrespective of the differences within them. It is noteworthy that a committee for the protection of the interests of *savarnas* has recently come into existence. The age of the agitators was generally below 40 years. Caste, education and occupation did not make much difference to the actual involvement in the streets. Thus the communities which are considered 'civilised' participated openly in rioting, though it is usually considered below their dignity to do so. But this was not the first time that the certificate, diploma and degree holders of these castes went out to fight. They did it in 1969 in Ahmedabad in the Hindu-Muslim riots.
3. The most aggressive and cruel in their attacks on the SC were patidar landholders in Kheda,

Ahmedabad and Mehsana. These are also the districts of concentration of an awakened SC population.

4. This time, barring stray instances, castes like wakhris and thakors did not oblige the patidar agriculturists and middle classes by attacking the SC. The Muslims against whom all the three were used in Hindu-Muslim riots remained neutral.
5. The STs are on the side of SCs. But the SEBC's attitude is not so clear. Some of them have higher positions than the SCs in caste hierarchy. They may not like to associate themselves with the SCs. However, the indications are that their occupational interests might lead them to come nearer to one another. It happened when the employees, belonging to all the three categories, met together to oppose the proposed strike in the government secretariat.
6. The higher and intermediate castes who have economic and social power also seek political power. The other castes, including SC, ST and SEBC, cannot be characterised that way. Only some individuals among these may be self-employed or have small shops or even a small industry. These instances provide evidence only of their ability to go in for the same activities that the higher castes perform, but nothing more than that.
7. Thus, the battle lines in Surat in terms of castes and classes are clear. At the present moment the higher, upper middle and some middle classes and the higher castes and intermediate or middle castes are on one side of the battle line. On the other side are the SC, the ST and SEBC employees of government and semi-government agencies like the nationalised banks and LIC Employment rather than caste categories are likely to bring them nearer.

What effect this will have on caste and group loyalties is still an open question.

8. The antagonistic feelings between the higher castes and the SC will not disappear by any compromise in the case of present agitation.
9. The failure of Gandhian ideology has been conspicuous. It was not effective in Gujarat in 1969 and 1974, and has not been effective in 1981. The SC and ST can now write off that ideology as a force in their favour.

II

Why did the resentment against the SC flare up in such a violent form even though the policy of reservations has been in existence since 1950 and reservations in post-graduate medical courses have existed since 1975? We take up first the immediate cause, the specific reservations in the medical faculty. When it was first introduced during President's Rule in 1975, the students did protest and went on strike for about 20 days. But they could not go beyond because of Emergency. The government ordinance was accepted by the Babubhai Patel ministry and legislature which had a great higher caste/class component. Probably it wanted to draw the SC/ST on their side. The Baxi Commission was also appointed by the Janata government. But the recent elections which brought the Congress (I) into power changed the composition of the Cabinet and the legislators. The chief minister is a Rajput whom the higher castes consider as a rajput of lower rank. He has also his base among the kshatriyas or the former *baraiyas*. But more important than that is that for the first time a non-Bania, non-Brahmin, non-Patidar has become the chief minister, with the backing of about 100 members in the Congress(I) legislative party who belong to SC/ST or SEBC.

In private, some medico leaders say that either reservations go or Solanki goes.

The 30 years of Independence have brought about a great change in the social character of the population of Gujarat. The owners of small and large industries, traders and shopkeepers, contractors, middlemen and rich fanners have acquired social, economic and political power out of proportion to their numbers. There has been a corresponding increase in the number of industrial workers and landless agricultural labourers. Along with the growth of industry, trade and agriculture, activities such as banking, insurance, education, health and other social services have grown. More people are now employed by government.

Government has absorbed a large number of secondary school, college and university educated persons. There has been an unprecedented growth in the number of students at all stages of education.

Along with this numerical growth of the middle and salaried classes there has been a stratification based on education, income and occupation which has coincided with the traditional caste stratification. The higher castes got into all the positions created by the growth referred to above, carrying with them the beliefs, values and attitudes of the old caste stratification. The sense of political, economic, social and intellectual power generated by the new developments coalesced with that of the old social stratification including the arrogance of the higher castes. Up to 1965, these castes and strata did not experience much difficulty in having their way. But the lack of economic growth began to be felt thereafter. The situation is now so bad that their inbuilt structural advantages have to be defended in the streets in the name of justice, merit, competence, efficiency and other things that are associated with public certification or merit.

In the meanwhile, similar developments were taking place among the intermediate, lower and SCs, the tribals and the religious minorities. But these were insignificant except among some Muslim communities. The SC had a higher rate of literacy and participation in higher education than the ST. Certain SEBC communities have still better rates of literacy and participation in higher education. Among some SEBC Muslims, such rates are rather low. However, all of these groups were conscious that they had not had their full share in education and general economic development up to 1965, and that even now they are badly off in this respect. Among these communities a stratum comprising educated persons serving in white collar occupations and living in a better style came to be formed and which has now become the spokesman of these communities. It is true that the gains these communities have made are insignificant in comparison with their total number. But even the insignificant dent that the reservation policy has made is considered intolerable by the higher castes. The higher castes feel that their whole structural advantage is in danger. They refuse to see that if the structure of opportunities expands they will still have the advantage. Their fear is that the advancement and participation of the lower communities will lower their position socially and politically.

It is significant that some discontented legislators of Congress (I) complained to the prime minister's emissary, Jaysukhlal Hathi, that the present cabinet in Gujarat is not a balanced one and that it cannot satisfy all 'classes'. But what is meant by the term 'classes' becomes clear in the constructive suggestion of the discontented Congress (I) legislators. According to them, the present cabinet has not been able to attract the 'Ujialat Classes', that is, the white collar higher castes. It is well known that there is a group in the Congress (I) which believes that power is going out of the hands of the higher castes in the higher economic

strata and that their position can be defended better by being inside the Congress (I). The struggle thus is by those who occupy higher positions in both the old and new types of the stratificatory systems.

It is important to note that the greater beneficiaries of reservations in terms of percentages are the ST, SC and the SEBC groups—in that order. But the SCs have been the target of attack both of the higher castes and of police. The SCs are numerically small and a minority in villages and are an easy target. As we have seen the economic structure is not able to provide employment opportunities for the lower strata of the higher castes. Still less is it able to satisfy the desire for mobility of the castes lower in hierarchy. The high castes, therefore, wish to prevent the mobility of lower castes and contain the discontent among the lower strata of higher castes by appealing to the concealed caste sentiment among them and speaking publicly against casteism, communalism, reservation and all that is particularistic, narrow and parochial. Thus, although 'merit' appears to be a progressive slogan, it is in fact a weapon for defending the moribund Hindu hierarchy and maintaining the social and economic status quo.

This is the real social and cultural issue which both the anti-reservationists and the reservationists in the final analysis have to face. There is little mobility in economic, educational and occupational spheres. Unless the stagnation is broken and the door to further mobility is opened, the conflict will go on even if a compromise is arrived at in the present case. The alignments of social groups and the ideological and economic forces that are giving motion to the interrelations between groups needs to be watched. Probably the caste factor will not completely disappear. But the new secular lower strata in both the higher and the lower castes will become more distinct and the caste factor might become to that extent less effective. Some political parties will have to see that and organise the

people accordingly. Without such political intervention the oppression of the lower castes will continue and continue to increase.

Another thing that is barely concealed is the higher caste prejudice against the Untouchables. How can these 'Dheds' demand equality with us? But the upper castes also want to be called progressive. Therefore, the argument of 'merit' above 'caste'. Anyone, with some acquaintance with Indian reality knows what this argument means. In short, the SC and STs are asked to compete with the structurally entrenched interests in society. The SC, ST and other lower castes are outside the circle of these interests and they will not be allowed to enter into it. Competence and merit under the present social structure is nothing short of social Darwinism. It suits the upwardly mobile upper classes and, in the Indian context, also the upper castes.

[This article was completed four days before the agitation was unconditionally withdrawn on 13 April 1981.]

THIS ANTI-MANDAL MANIA*

K. BALAGOPAL

There is perhaps no issue on which we are such hypocrites as caste; nor any other which brings out all that is worst in us with such shameful ease. The moment V. P. Singh announces the decision to implement the Mandal Commission's recommendation of reservations for the backward castes, an avalanche of obscenity hits the country. It carries before it the Press, the universities, and opinion-makers of all kinds.

Arun Shourie, a one-time civil liberties leader, starts writing sickeningly casteist articles and editorials. He shelves temporarily his habit of delivering self-righteous sermons to the reading public and tactical advice to the National Front on its internal and external problems, and starts writing the kind of insulting stuff against the Dalits that would have got him lynched if he had dared to so much as hint against the forward castes. An acknowledged constitutional expert like H. M. Seervai forgets for the moment the ideal of social egalitarianism that is one of the redeeming features of the Indian Constitution, and laments instead the death and destruction of merit and talent that egalitarianism has always been accused of leading to. Girilal Jain, whose explicit advocacy of Rajiv Gandhi's cause was tempered with a seemingly gentlemanly style of writing now comes out in rabid prose to demand the ouster of V. P. Singh's government on the ground that it has lost the sympathy of a handful of forward caste students in the north Indian capitals. Letter writers to the English language press whose staid views and laboured prose are a byword, suddenly turn poetic and start comparing the

pranks of the anti-reservationists to the French student revolt of 1968 and the Chinese student uprising of 1989.

India Today, a news magazine that normally affects an 'objective' and unemotional style of reporting, sheds all pretence of neutrality and openly comes out in full blast to bulldoze the views of its substantial readership in English, Hindi, Tamil Malayalam and Telugu. It denounces the 'wretched display of cynicism' of the National Front constituents and supporters, and attacks the 'cynical waffling' of Rajiv Gandhi, *not* because all of them are covertly supporting the anti-reservation movement while defending reservations in public, but for precisely the opposite reason that they are not denouncing Mandal Commission's recommendations openly. It publishes one of the more offensive cartoons against reservations: the picture shows V. P. Singh and a bunch of Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs) and backward castes (BC) men and women happily lolling in a seaborne ship with three flags indicating the three categories hoisted on the deck, grinning cruelly at the forward caste students who are sinking all round with their degree certificates held high. It is difficult to imagine a more atrocious caricature of reality, which is almost exactly the opposite, notwithstanding all the laments you hear about reservation quotas.

The entire forward caste Hindu community has suddenly become a solid rock. Fundamentalist and secular, Marxist and Gandhian, urban and rural, have all been united as nothing else would ever have united them. They are led by the academics, the whole lot of whom—left, right and centre—have suddenly discovered that the only legitimate division of society is between the talented and the inefficient, and between the rich and the poor. People who would have normally called you a Naxalite if you so much as spoke of class differences have made the sudden discovery that 'the only dichotomy in Indian society is that

between the haves and the have-nots', as an unlikely statement of a Haryana Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leader puts it. Caste will undoubtedly be the last of the inequitous institutions to die out in this country. It will outlast everything else.

Everybody has suddenly made the unbelievable discovery that there is something called 'merit' which has been in the possession of the Indian elite all these days, and which is now sought to be destroyed by V. P. Singh to please the wretched talentless backward castes and get their votes. A new term and a new falsehood have entered the ideological ballast of the Indian ruling classes. For four full decades it is the forward-caste Hindus who have dominated every aspect of life in the country. They have held all the land, all the capital in trade, finance and industry, they have held all the top positions in administration, education, science, technology and medicine, and what a pass they have brought the country to! The economy is running a fever of nearly double-digit inflation, coupled with sluggish growth and paucity of resources; its politics is ridden with crises of all kinds and is perverted by the ills of corruption; its agriculture is stagnant even in Green Revolution showpiece areas; its administration is inefficient, unimaginative, and of course corrupt. And it is these people who today claim that if others are allowed to get in, that will spell the death of development for India!

It is not very important whether the Mandal Commission's listing of backward castes is very rational and scientific. That listing is undoubtedly the weakest part of an otherwise well-argued report. A rational debate concerning the identification of backward castes can be held, and objective criteria evolved, if that is all the issue involved. After all, the south Indian states have been implementing reservations for BCs for more than two decades, on the basis of quite a reasonable classification of BCs. But that is not the issue at all is proved by the agitational forms and

slogans chosen by the forward castes. Just as a rational debate can and must be joined rationally, a casteist onslaught can only be fought in caste terms, and in the streets if necessary. The forward caste youth are not only going around insulting and humiliating the BCs and SCs, they further have the cheek to say that the government's decision has provoked caste war in the country. The youth are spoiling for a fight and their fathers are sitting at home writing articles, editorials and speeches, egging them on to fight to the finish.

It is difficult to forget Arun Shourie's initial editorials urging the forward caste youth to not allow the agitation to die out; and he is one editor who has consistently opposed all agitations, whether in his office or out in the streets. The pamphleteers against reservations who are glorified by the names of editors of newspapers and professors in our universities have the cheek not only to claim that it is reservations that provoke casteism, but also to add the patronising bit of advice that since employees who get into offices and institutions on reservations are humiliated and insulted at the place of work, it is in the interest of their own self-respect to give up reservations, which is rather like a thief saying that he has the habit of pocketing other people's valuables when he is in the mood, and so they, had better not possess any. The association of Class I officers of the Government of India urges the government not only to withdraw the decision to implement Mandal Commission's recommendations but also to withdraw the existing reservations for the SCs and STs on the ground that such political expediency will have a deleterious effect on efficiency of administration; as of now 94.32 per cent of the Class I officers of the Government of India are forward-caste Hindus (plus a few elite Muslims and Christians), and what exactly is their record of efficiency that justifies this casteist comment on 85 per cent of the population? In any other context, such blatant deceit and hypocrisy would not

have been tolerated, but then caste is quite a unique context for us Indians.

The extraordinary unanimity exhibited by the press is truly astonishing. Has it occurred to any honest press person—for reason drives us to presume that some among them must be honest people—to ponder whether this unanimity is caused exclusively by a superior concern for the future of this nation that the press possesses and Bindeswari Prasad Mandai did not—and Ram Vilas Paswan and Mulayam Singh Yadav do not—or by the more mundane fact that the entire press corps is staffed by forward-caste Hindus, and that too principally brahmins? After all, they disagree about everything under the sun; about capitalism and socialism, private sector and public sector, Rajiv Gandhi and V. P. Singh, Devi Lal and Arun Nehru, about every conceivable matter concerning the public life of this country. Why then does this remarkable unanimity prevail, all the way from the unlikely pair of Arun Shourie and Girilal Jain, through the English language columnists—who have probably never seen the poor village brahmin and his destitute children about whom they are filling copious columns now, and many of whom probably have precious little of our cultural ethos left in them but still cannot forget caste prejudices—right down to the scribes of the vernacular press that normally echoes Devi Lai's diatribes against the Arun Shouries and the Goenkas of the newspaper world?

Everybody knows that if employment is all that is involved, reservation is a small issue. The role of the public sector in employment generation, which has never been commensurate with its share in investment, is now gradually being decreased. The initiative in investment is passing into the hands of the private sector, and there is very free talk of handing over even basic industries to the private sector. Even essential services like education and health are getting privatised rapidly. Within the public

sector, many state governments are already implementing reservations for backward castes, and anyway V. P. Singh has promised he will not impose? The decision to implement Mandal Commission recommendations on any state government, a promise that was promptly followed by announcements from the chief ministers of Orissa and Himachal Pradesh that their states would not implement the decision; Uttar Pradesh and Bihar would have followed suit if only both the states had not had Yadav chief ministers. And within what is left, V. P. Singh has excluded defence establishments, scientific and technological research institutions, and central government educational institutions from reservations for BCs. What this leaves out, for all practical purposes, is a few jobs like postal runners and railway booking clerks, which is clearly nothing much to get excited over either way. The highly emotional opposition to reservations, therefore, must be seen not in the context of employment and unemployment, but in the context of the caste system, and the continuing role it is playing in determining the distribution of resources and political power. It is precisely because reservations attack the caste system, an attack that the Indian polity can ill-afford, that there is so much fuss against them.

To get a comprehensive look one has to see the totality of resources available in the country, and the institutional means by which they are apportioned among the people. Capital, land and the rest of nature are the three major sources whose ownership confers status and power; those who do not possess them labour on them to obtain a livelihood. The possession is for the major part with the forward castes or with the state which is again principally accessible to them. This is not just an incidental correlation of caste and class, not just a historic relic, but a real relation and a living reality. Sudipto Kaviraj, an academic whose name figures in progressive circles, has managed to convince himself of the unreality of caste (according to his

opinion as quoted by *India Today*) to the extent of remarking that asking forward castes to give up jobs in favour of the Dalits merely because their forefathers committed injustice ages ago is like saying that the Hindus can destroy the mosque at Ayodhya and build a temple there because some Muslim rulers in the past destroyed some temples and built mosques. It appears that when it comes to the caste question we take leave not only of our intelligence and our sensitivity to the feelings of other people (how else does one explain the obnoxious stuff that Arun Shourie is filling the *Indian Express* with, day in and day out), but even our capacity to see things which stare us in the face. Whatever Babur did or did not do to the temple which did or did not exist at the spot where Rama did or did not take birth is a historic relic, a happening or non-happening of the past. Caste is very much a living reality. Caste was one of the principal determinants of the distribution of resources and power in medieval India, and *the* principal theoretical justification of exploitation; today it continues to play both the roles, in spite of a certain amount of capital penetration and political democratisation, the principal difference being that it is today juridically displaced from the high place it had in the age of the *dharmasastras*. Caste is juridically dead, but very much alive politically and ideologically. If it is in general a theoretical fallacy to confuse the juridical form with the real content, one must be particularly careful in wishing away things which do not exist juridically, in a country like India whose ruling classes do not possess the requisite measure of progressive potential to be able to afford even an ideologically camouflaged reflection of all real political and economic relations in juridical forms. The inability to see this point is one of the main reasons why Marxist analysis of caste in contemporary India has generally been very unsatisfactory.

Tickets to the assembly or Parliament at election time, public works and excise contracts, co-operative loans, industrial licences, supply contracts, managerial jobs in the private sector, a vice-chancellor's post, or even a favoured relation with the administration or a profitable position within the faculty of the universities where academics unburden themselves of weighty lectures on caste and class (among other things), not one of these is obtained without the use of caste. Caste plays a significant role in shaping the composition of India's elite; the propertied classes use their caste to maintain and reproduce their status, and to acquire commensurate political power. Those among the forward castes who are not blessed with much property at birth use their caste to climb up the political ladder and subsequently acquire property. Caste also plays an important role in cementing the blocks within the elite for intra-ruling class conflicts, and for mobilising the middle classes for assaults against the poor. The poor among the forward castes—who are undoubtedly numerous—have one advantage which the Dalits do not have, viz the use of caste links with the rich to obtain a small job or a petty loan; not all of them always succeed, but the possibility is undeniably present.

The forward castes use their caste identity for all these purposes, but when the backward castes attempt to use their caste identity to gain a foothold in the corridors of power—or even to get an ill-paid clerk's job—there is so much fuss about destruction of merit and death of efficiency. The casteism of the forward castes is never seen as casteism, for it is an advantage always possessed by privileged groups that their existence is taken to be part of the natural order of things. It is the challenge to that casteism that is seen as casteism. The unwritten reservation that the forward castes enjoy in the form of 'connections' is incomparably more potent than all the

recommendations Mandal has made for the benefit of the backward castes, but that is not seen as reservation.

But connections are not all; the list of reservations available in society is quite long, except that nobody thinks of them as reservations unless they take statutory form, and are meant for the benefit of the oppressed castes. Good public school education is reserved for children of the rich, and that reservation goes on for generation after generation. I am sure most people will find it terribly illogical if one says that just as everybody now argues that reservations in education to the Dalits must stop after one generation, and from the second onwards they should fend for themselves, it should be equally made a rule that if parents have had public school education, their children and the subsequent generations must be denied access to such schools and must be made to study in government schools. A cultural atmosphere at home that is conducive to book learning is reserved for the brahmins and the brahminised upper castes. It will no doubt be regarded as a monstrous suggestion if one says that since these people have enjoyed this reservation for so many generations, hereafter brahmin children will be removed from their homes at birth and brought up in a hostel where they will have to share a common cultural atmosphere with other castes. The 'right connections' is another reservation widely prevalent in society, and that again is available only to the rich and the privileged communities. This reservation too, far from ceasing after one generation or two, goes on for generation after generation, and indeed becomes stronger as time goes on.

But, of course, the biggest reservation of them all is property. Property is reserved for the progeny of the propertied, for generation after generation, irrespective of talent or merit. It will no doubt be treated as sacrilegious if one suggests that hereafter property shall not be inherited by the children of the propertied, but by the persons who

possess the greatest merit in handling it. After all, if it is a national disaster for jobs to be given to meritless persons on grounds of caste, it is equally a national disaster for property to pass into the hands of persons not competent to put it to use for no reason other than a genetic accident. And let nobody answer that if they are inefficient in managing property then they will lose it sooner or later, and let nobody prove a marginalist theorem to support this. We know very well that no such thing happens in real life. The lawyers of the Supreme Court, in an astonishing step, boycotted work for a day in protest against the Mandal Commission even while the writ petitions filed against the Mandal Commission's recommendations were pending before the Supreme Court, and the court had announced the dates of hearing; if the matter was something that affected the life and livelihood of the poor, these very same lawyers would have refused to so much as sign a protest note, on the ground that the matter is sub-judice; and yet when it comes to the Mandal Commission, not just one or two of them, but a majority of the Supreme Court Bar Association finds it possible to boycott the court without any compunction whatsoever. Now, all these lawyers have five figure monthly incomes, and quite a few of them six-figure incomes. Not one of them requires a government job for his or her children, they have all the required connections to push them into the affluent private sector—starting with their own practice, which will be inherited by their children whether they possess any forensic talent or not. This fact itself proves that what is involved in this whole anti-Mandal mania is not employment but casteism, but that is not the point I want to make right now. The point is: will these legal luminaries agree to the passage of a law saying that hereafter the practice of a lawyer shall not be inherited by the son or daughter but by the most talented law graduate in the neighbourhood, for any such

reservation on genetic grounds is destructive of merit, and harmful to the country?

This whole humbug about merit is the most trying piece of double-speak the Indian elite has invented in the last four decades. It is difficult to believe that a man of the world like Arun Shourie, who certainly does not have the excuse of innocence that is the only plea the anti-Mandal adolescents can possibly take, really believes that he occupies the august editorial chair at the *Indian Express* for reasons of sheer merit. Arun Shourie's egoism is evident in his style of preaching, but it is difficult to believe that even egoism can blind a man to such an extent. If Arun Shourie had not suited Goenka's politics he would not be editing *Indian Express*; and if he did not suit some proprietor's politics he would not have been editing any paper at all, notwithstanding all the talent he may possess. He is certainly aware of this, and yet he finds it possible to fill that paper, the largest circulated English daily to this country's misfortune, with casteist filth day in and day out about the merit the forward castes possess and the imbecility of the Dalits. What is most offensive is the definition being adopted for knowledge, competence, etc. We have inherited from brahminical Hinduism a most undemocratic definition of knowledge that dismisses as not worth knowing all that the working people know by the very nature of the work they do. They possess knowledge about cultivation, about weaving, about masonry and smithy, and even about the proper cremation of a dead body. This knowledge has been the basis of the reproduction of society's material life, and yet brahminism would not recognise it as knowledge. That non-recognition goes with the appropriation of the material wealth produced by them. You cannot allow the working masses to claim the title of knowledge for their skills and yet deprive them of the fruits of what they produce. And so only knowledge about the Srutis and Smrtis was recognised as

knowledge, and proficiency in this alone signified intelligence. If a democratic revolution had properly taken place in India, and if modern science and technology had grown out of the knowledge the working people possess, perhaps we would have broken philosophically with this brahminical epistemology, but instead of that we have completely destroyed even the basis for the traditional knowledge the working people of this country possess and grafted on to our economy the science and technology borrowed from abroad in the form of textbooks, which again has been monopolised by the very same brahmins who have established a monopoly of book knowledge. Thus, the brahminical theory of knowledge continues to shape the curriculum of our schools and colleges, and it is proficiency in this knowledge defined as book learning that is being called 'merit'. One only has to imagine scrapping this curriculum and replacing it with knowledge about cropping, weaving and carpentry, and imagine then how handicapped the brahminised upper castes would find themselves in such schools, to recognise the ridiculous snobbery of this whole debate about 'merit'. Either we get rid of this undemocratic educational culture, or else—since there are no signs today of such a change—accept the necessity of providing with reservations those people who are at a disadvantage in this educational culture, not because they are incapable of book learning but because they have been deliberately kept out of it for ages. And since it is on the basis of caste that they have been kept out, it is only on the basis of caste that we can identify the needy in this matter. It requires a special blindness to ignore the fact that our cultural life is still caste determined.

As for the rest, so long as caste remains one of the determinants of property and power, so long as it is used by the rich and the powerful as a means of maintaining and strengthening their domination, it remains the moral right

and indeed the political duty of the poor and the deprived to use their caste identity in the struggle for their liberation. Class struggle and caste struggle are not two opposite or contradictory things, but are closely interwoven and co-terminous struggles.

To end, it is necessary to emphasise that it is pointless to see the matter in terms of employment opportunities, their dearth or paucity. The whole issue is best seen within the context of the growing authoritarianism of the Indian polity. The Indian ruling class has passed the stage where it feels it can accommodate the needs of the masses at least up to a point. Nor is it any longer really interested in long-term development on the basis of a planned use of the nation's resources. Instead its various sections are busy grabbing all that they can lay their hands on, and this is a no-holds-barred activity. Not a single one *of* the measures meant for the welfare of the masses, especially the rural poor who mostly belong to the SCs STs and the BCs has been implemented, nor are they likely to be implemented in the future. Land ceilings, minimum wages, dry land development, rural industries, not one of these has been blessed with implementation. On the other hand the rural propertied classes are appropriating to themselves the control of not only land but all the natural resources that used to be available to the poor and provide them with some livelihood. Forests, fisheries, firewood—all of nature has passed from the hands of the labouring people into the control of the rich.

In this situation, any assertion of the poor for better opportunities is met with a policy of no appeasement and ruthless suppression. Movements of the rural poor are met with police brutality or the assaults of landlords' goons. And the aspiration of the upper fringe of the oppressed for a decent job or a share in political power is met with the kind of obscene attack that we are witnessing today. Just as the caste identity is used to mobilise the middle classes

under the *senas*, caste is again being used to incite the middle classes among the forward castes against the poor. Such a caste mobilisation can only be fought in caste terms, and there should be no inhibitions on this score.

THE DALIT QUESTION AND
THE POLITICAL RESPONSE*A Comparative Study of
Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh**

SUDHA PAI

Historically, the 'Dalit question', i.e. removal of discrimination, socio-economic improvement and share in political power, has occupied centre-stage in Indian politics. Since the colonial period political leaders have put forward different paths for the uplift of this section hoping thereby to mobilise them and obtain their support. This issue was the cause of the disagreement between Gandhi and Ambedkar which left its imprint on later political debates. In recent years, Dalit assertion against upper-caste domination and political mobilisation of Dalits has emerged as one of the most significant factors affecting politics in the Indian states. All political parties are attempting to gain the support of this social group which in some states has emerged as a 'third force' that holds the electoral balance between all-India parties in both assembly and national elections.

This essay is a comparative study of Dalit mobilisation by the Congress and the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) in two states: Uttar Pradesh (UP) and Madhya Pradesh (MP). In the existing literature the concept of mobilisation is used to analyse electoral strategies employed by the political parties to obtain votes from a section of the population—in this case Dalits. This aspect has been extensively covered for both the selected states of UP and MP during the 1990s

and will not be the main focus here. Rather the attempt is to understand the response of political parties to fundamental shifts in the democratic arena in the 1990s in two important states in north India—UP and MP: the decline of the single-dominant party system and the emergence of narrower political formations based on identity which has created a more competitive democratic arena. In UP, the collapse of the Congress as a broad-based party has provided room for parties based on ascriptive identities such as the BSP representing the Dalits. In MP, the Congress has been in power in the 1990s, but it has faced a constant challenge from the BSP and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) making the support of the weaker sections imperative.

In this context, it is worth examining the differential patterns of mobilisation employed by the BSP and the Congress in UP and MP respectively, using state power from above to put into effect programmes for Dalits, in order to enlarge their support base among them. It analyses the conceptualisation of a model of development for Dalits by the BSP and the Congress Party while in power during the 1990s in UP and MP respectively. It is argued here that driven by both an ideological understanding of the Dalit question as well as the political necessities arising out of politics, two distinct patterns of socio-political mobilisation using state power and patronage have emerged during the 1990s with important consequences for state and national politics.

In UP, emerging from a strong identity-based movement, the BSP's agenda for Dalit uplift is based on the notion of *swabhiman* (self-respect). Its leadership has argued that 'self-respect is more important to dalits than material gains' and 'what we are fighting for is dignity and self-respect' (Mayawati 2003: 15). The uplift of Dalits has been conceptualised as social justice that is both retributive in character and meant exclusively for Dalits. On the other

hand, no clear agenda has emerged for the economic uplift of Dalits. The BSP's welfare/developmental programmes have been 'mere symbolism' to obtain support and have depleted the resources of the state contributing to its fiscal crisis, without addressing the longer-term deprivations faced, particularly by the subaltern Dalits. Despite this, there has been a steady rise in political consciousness throughout the 1990s and Dalit mobilisation based on identity under the leadership of the BSP has played a central and determining role in state politics. There has been considerable political empowerment of Dalits and the BSP has come to occupy a significant position in state politics.

In contrast, the MP model of development places uplift of all weaker sections including the Dalits, within its overall strategy of economic development. It views Dalits as a disadvantaged minority in need of state assistance whose political support they hope to gain. Dalit mobilisation has not taken place in the state as in UP against the backdrop of an identity movement. But the existence of a large Dalit population made itself felt and Dalit mobilisation emerged during the 1990s as a significant factor in state politics. All parties are competing to gain the support of the Dalits. In this situation, the Congress Party under Digvijay Singh, through the Rajiv Gandhi mission and the stress on human development sought to convey the message during its period in power that it was committed to ensure development for the weaker sections. It concentrated on improvement of the socio-economic condition of Dalits and providing them equality of opportunity based on 'diversity' and 'democratisation'. However, evaluation of the functioning of some programmes for Dalits and weaker sections, suggests that the intentions of the government were not transparent, based on political calculations, actual implementation was slow and ineffective and could not in some cases address the needs of quality and equity for

Dalits. Despite its efforts, the Congress Party has not been able to substantially improve its support base among Dalits. It has not been able to compete for their support with both the BSP and the BJP, which has contributed to undermining of its position in the state and in national politics.

A comparison between MP and UP is of significance for understanding differential patterns of Dalit mobilisation in north India. Both states are placed in the BIMARU category; and have a large, disadvantaged Dalit population that until recently did not experience identity consciousness or participate in politics. As the Congress Party was dominant in both states until the late-1980s they have a long history of Dalit mobilisation through state patronage and support. The political discourse underlying the actions of the UP and the MP government during the 1990s has been similar: both tried to appropriate the Ambedkarite legacy and claimed to be following its ideals of social democracy. These similarities allow us to analyse the differential patterns of Dalit mobilisation adopted by political parties to carve out a base in the increasingly competitive system that has emerged following the decline of single party dominance and the rise of narrower political formations based upon identity in the 1990s.

I

AGENDA FOR THE UPLIFT OF DALITS

In UP and MP, the Congress Party has enjoyed a long spell of dominance in the post-Independence period. During this period, it consistently followed an agenda for uplift of Dalits in various forms. In UP the collapse of the Congress Party in the early 1990s provided room for the BSP to emerge as the party representing the Dalits. In MP, the Congress retained power during the 1990s, but its policies for Dalits have undergone some significant changes. This

section provides the backdrop against which the selected programmes are examined in the next section.

The BSP Model of Political Empowerment

The BSP's model for the uplift of the Dalits is based on political empowerment, i.e. it believes that state power is the 'key' or agent to introduce social change (Pai 2002: 124). The party has followed a two-fold strategy: electoral and coalitional in order to widen its base and capture power. Based on identity mobilisation which led to increasing politicisation of the Dalits, the BSP by the early 1990s was able to replace the Congress as the party representing them in UP. It gradually increased its seat and vote share in the state vis-a-vis both the SP and the BJP throughout the 1990s from 9.2 per cent in the 1991 state assembly elections to 10.8 per cent in 1996 and over 20 per cent in the 2003 assembly elections. Consequently, in a situation where no party had a clear majority, no government could be formed without the participation of the BSP. The formation of three coalition governments with the BJP and the implementation of a number of Dalit-oriented programmes played an important role in the consolidation of Dalit vote behind the party by the end of the decade.¹

The BSP since its inception has been very critical of the Indian state, which it is argued, has not and cannot provide economic upliftment for Dalits. Since Independence the state has been under the control of manuvadi leaders with brahminism as a ruling socio-cultural ideology. All leaders and political parties the country has produced, particularly the Congress with its upper-caste leadership, are 'manuvadi'. All policies of the government after Independence, based upon such thinking have hence, prevented uplift of the Dalits. Despite the Dalit-bahujans forming a majority of the population, the continuation of the hierarchical caste system after Independence has

ensured that the fruits of development are in large measure, channeled to the upper and middle castes/classes, strengthening their position in the society and polity. Consequently, Dalits have remained poor and exploited and deprived of a share in political power and decision making. Therefore, the BSP holds that capture of state power by a Dalit-based party, which will establish a Dalit-bahujan state, is essential for their socio-economic uplift (Pai 2002: 123).

A central role therefore is granted to the Dalit-bahujan state and use of state power for social change by the BSP. It believes that an egalitarian order can be achieved by means of 'social engineering from above', i.e. introducing developmental and welfare programmes using the power of the state rather than grassroots mobilisation and revolution from below. The main role of the state following the capture of power is to provide dignity and an alternative 'social justice' to the Dalits. Social justice forms the core of the party's political tenets—a tool of mobilisation, an agenda of social and political action and the base upon which the party's programmes rest. However, social justice is conceived in a narrow manner as being exclusive, i.e. meant only for the Dalits and retributive, i.e. to right historical wrongs (ibid.: 113). The BSP does not give importance to civil society, which is conceived as an unequal sphere in which oppression and domination of the weaker and disadvantaged sections has been taking place. The Dalit-controlled state, therefore, has the role of protecting the disadvantaged sections against oppression, which the Indian state has failed to do.

The BSP describes itself as an Ambedkarite Party but it has a view of the role of the state in economic development that is different from that of Ambedkar. For Ambedkar, it was not so much the political potential of democracy that the BSP stresses upon, as the economic functions of the state which could prove to be an emancipatory instrument

for the Dalits (Jayal 2001: 141). He held that the lack of formal political equality could be made up by reorganisation of the economic structure of society. He opposed the Gandhian model of decentralised socialism as it would merely reproduce the unequal rural power structures and preferred the more bureaucratised model of state socialism, which became the central aspect of the Nehruvian model of development. In the *States and Minorities*, a memorandum submitted to the Constituent Assembly in 1948, Ambedkar laid out the economic functions of the state in independent India. While arguing for special safeguards against social and economic discrimination of socially deprived classes, he pointed to the need for state socialism because he argued it would, 'put an obligation on the state to plan the economic life of people on lines which would lead to highest point of productivity without closing avenue to private enterprise and also provide for equitable distribution of wealth'. Hence, the ideology of the BSP shares with the Ambedkarite view an emphasis on the importance of the state. But it diverges from Ambedkar in that it is much less the economic promise of state policy than its administrative and political potential that is now seen as the instrument of Dalit emancipation. The BSP's emphasis is also exclusively on state structures, which, it argues, have always been the preserve of the upper castes (ibid.).

However, no detailed economic agenda has emerged based on this ideology. An important reason is the view that the BSP leadership has of the problem of poverty and the means to overcome it. According to Kanshi Ram, poverty and deprivation among Dalits is the result of social and political powerlessness historically rooted in the brahminical system and not an economic condition to be dealt with by economic policies. In his writings he argues that the prevailing economic inequalities such as skewed distribution of land and income is the result of the unequal

caste system. For example, it is oppression by upper-caste landlords, which is the root cause of the unequal relations on land, and ill treatment of landless labourers. He does not advocate redistribution of land, as this would introduce social revolution, which he is keen to avoid. The unused lands instead could be utilised to set up large, mechanised collective farms on which the landless could work and prosper. Rather, if political power was in the hands of the oppressed, they could demand better wages and working conditions and would no longer be badly treated on grounds of their low social status. Economic power, according to him, is based upon political power; and political equality by attaining political power is primary as it assures freedom from social oppression and improves status (Singh 1996: 37).

In sum, Kanshi Ram's position has been that such questions are unimportant, appropriate policies of economic development could be adopted once in office, it is equality of political opportunity that is central for him. While the need for ending poverty and introducing social change is underlined, and a number of required policies mentioned, such as land reform, nationalisation of industry, need for better wages, modernisation of industry, etc. how this will be implemented by the party has not been clarified. Thus, Kanshi Ram seems to be advocating a form of 'state socialism' though he still believes in the importance of individual property rights. Redistribution of economic assets and provision of social justice is possible only by the state; hence capturing power is given so much importance (Pai 2002: 125). However, only a Dalit-bahujan state is capable of implementing these measures, not one controlled by manuvadi parties headed by upper-caste leaders. The BSP as an Ambedkarite party on attaining power would establish 'real' and 'substantial' democracy, which for Kanshi Ram is rule of the majority, i.e. of the bahujans (ibid.: 118).

CONGRESS MODEL OF SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

In contrast, the Congress Party in MP placed the socio-economic improvement of Dalits together with other disadvantaged groups such as tribal, women and the poor, at the heart of its developmental strategy. Digvijay Singh in his pronouncements claimed that his government would promote a 'people-centric development policy ... through grass roots democratisation, decentralised governance and community participation' (Singh 2001a: 1). This model of development was adopted when the party came to power after defeating the BJP in the 1993 assembly elections but was strengthened and given greater importance after the party won the 1998 assembly elections. Many important policy documents such as the Bhopal Agenda and the reports of the Task Force were drawn up after the 1998 elections. Certain changes in the social base of the Congress Party made this strategy increasingly important in MP during the 1990s. The Congress as a single-dominant party had faced a sharp decline in a number of states beginning in the 1980s. However, empirical studies point to a shift in the social base of the party by the end of the 1990s: the re-invention of the Congress from a catch-all to a narrower party of the marginalised and poorer sections namely, the Dalits, Adivasis, Muslims and women in a number of states (Yadav 2003: 66). However, this was not true of MP where the support from the Dalits for the Congress was much lower than many other states (ibid.). A number of reasons contributed to this, not the least being the presence of the BSP in the northern districts of MP. Hence, the Congress found itself in the position of competing with both the BJP and the BSP for the support of the Dalits.

The BJP had performed well in the 1990 assembly elections gaining 219 seats out of 320. In 1993 it was able

to gain only 117 seats while the Congress was able to win 174 seats. While it is true that the weakening of the Babri Masjid issue and factionalism within the party were important reasons for its poor performance, an equally important reason, was its pro-upper-caste/class policies, which made it unpopular in rural areas particularly among the tribals, peasants, OBCs and other disadvantaged groups. The Congress' victory was primarily based on votes gained from rural constituencies due to disappointment with the policies of the BJP (Jaffrelot 1996: 129). Consequently, the BJP, as in UP, since the mid-1990s has been trying to modify its image as an upper-caste party and to widen its base among the Dalits. The Congress Party under Digvijay Singh was able to win in the 1998 assembly elections gaining 41.13 per cent of the votes, while the BJP stood second with 39.28 per cent of the votes. An important reason for the victory of the Congress Party was its policies for the weaker sections initiated by the Digvijay Singh government, which were continued with greater vigour during its second term.

From the 1993 elections onwards an important contest for the votes of the Dalits came from the BSP. The BSP was able to increase its tally of seats from two in 1990 to 11 seats in both 1993 and 1998; and double its vote share from 3.5 per cent in 1990 to 7 per cent and 6.15 per cent in the 1993 and 1998 state elections. The BSP became a 'third force' within the two-party system, cutting votes from the Congress and the BJP particularly in the northern districts bordering UP where bulk of the Dalit population is concentrated.² In this situation, Congress attempted to widen its base among the Dalits, to meet the challenge of both the BSP and the BJP.

Though conceived earlier, the clearest enunciation of the Dalit Agenda of the Congress Party in MP emerges in the Bhopal Document (BD) of 2001 (GoMP 2002). The MP

government organised the Bhopal Conference held in January 2001 in which a number of intellectuals were invited to discuss strategies for upliftment of weaker sections and gave full support to its recommendations for uplift of disadvantaged sections, particularly Dalits. A Task Force (TF) with six committees was also established to work out the proposed strategies in detail. The agenda for Dalit uplift in the Congress Party's model of development, which was based on the BD, the TF and other documents of the government, is discussed below.

In the Congress model of development emphasis is laid on the improvement of the socio-economic conditions of Dalits and not their political empowerment as in UP. The Congress saw itself as a party committed to the improvement of all the disadvantaged and weaker sections of society, not of the Dalits alone. The Dalits form a small and disadvantaged group in need of help from the state who can in turn at best hope for a share in political power. As the BD points out,

The SCs/STs will have to keep in mind that the community is unlikely to capture political power on its own—the community must recognise the fundamental nature of its existence: that is, of being a minority. (GoMP 2002: 59)

Consequently, in all pronouncements of the state government regarding Dalit uplift the emphasis was on a non-conflictual pattern of change, i.e. on conciliation and sharing between castes/classes based upon the acceptance by society of notions of equity and justice rather than on mobilisation based on 'recognition of difference', 'identity' or capture of power which has created conflict in UP between the upper and lower castes. The role of the state was visualised as a 'conciliator' between the Dalits and the rest of society. Economic change through the combined help of state and civil society must take place through evolutionary and not revolutionary channels....

While the Congress model accords a central role to the state in the economic uplift of the weaker sections, it must be distinguished from the earlier pattern of state interventionism on behalf of the Dalits under Congress rule. First, in the post-Independence period apart from providing reservations, scholarships to students, implementing welfare and poverty programmes the state under Congress governments had adopted a stance of neutrality in the economic sphere despite having the power to intervene. Equally important, hitherto the Dalit question was seen as part of mainstream development with growth percolating down to the Dalit poor.... Such an approach did not improve the economic conditions of Dalits who remained assetless and part of the population below the poverty line (ibid.).

Second, in the 1990s with the onset of globalisation the retreat of the state from economic activities has particularly affected the Dalits. This requires the intervention of civil society for promoting development. Entirely state-centric economic models of development pursued so far have not been beneficial to Dalits. Third, while emphasising that reservation quotas in the government sector need to be better implemented, the BD recognises for the first time that there are limits to reservations. The number of posts available with the government in the era of globalisation is shrinking and even if reservations were to be extended to the private sector, only a small section of the total Dalit population could be accommodated. Therefore, multi-pronged strategies involving the state, civil society and the market are required, such as democratisation of the unorganised sector, in which 92 per cent of the SC workforce is concentrated.

Against this background, the Congress model under Digvijay Singh provided a more interventionist role to the state, which it described as 'developmental activism'. More

specifically, needs of the Dalits were given a central place in development plans and state intervention was meant for at least three purposes: protection to Dalits; economic uplift; and education in order to provide social opportunity. Within this model education is given central importance as it is the path by which SCs can come out of traditional occupations which are related to the caste hierarchy and thereby 'enter a new phase of life' (GoMP 2002: 59). There is also stress on the fact that in the era of globalisation and increasing competition within the private sector, there is need for specialised education and not merely general education that was in the past given importance for obtaining government employment (ibid.).

Importance was also given to civil society institutions such as NGOs who are visualised as partners in providing development. With lessening of government employment the BD recommends the adoption of two practices in the private sector: diversity and democratisation. Drawing upon the US example, diversity means a commitment by private companies to providing equal opportunity to all sections of the population as well as the creation of a workforce at all levels that is broadly inclusive and draws upon the talent of all sections of society irrespective of ascriptive identities. It also applies in the educational field to all institutions whether in the public or private sector to ensure that Dalits are able to gain education of a high quality. Parallel to this is democratisation of capital that can provide an alternative to reservations by introducing new occupations and creating a class of entrepreneurs among Dalits. Another feature was the use of the mission approach outside the sphere of the state. The Rajiv Gandhi Mission was set up in August 1994 by the Digvijay Singh government with the idea that time-bound programmes (involving NGOs) could target specific weaknesses such as low literacy, high infant mortality, lack of drinking water, etc.

Finally, a significant feature is that a shift is visible in the public pronouncements of the Digvijay Singh government from earlier Congress governments. After paying a ritual homage to Gandhi and his attempts to promote the welfare of the Dalits, government documents invoke Babasaheb Ambedkar. The Bhopal Document opens with 'declaring our belief in Baba Saheb Ambedkar's ideal of Social Democracy'... (and cites) Ambedkar's notion of state socialism and the need for state supremacy in order to overcome the traditional society (GoMP 2003: 3). Thus, the Congress Party in MP appropriated the legacy of Ambedkar in order to meet the political challenge of the BSP, which describes itself as an Ambedkarite party.[...]

CONCLUSION

The significant question is what are the political dividends or capital that the BSP and the Congress have been able to obtain from the agendas and programmes adopted while in power during the 1990s. Clearly the political gains of the two parties have been differential. In UP the BSP's espousal of self-respect and dignity struck a sensitive chord among Dalits who, unhappy with oppression and humiliation by upper castes, moved towards the party despite its lack of a clear-cut economic agenda for Dalits. Through a series of welfare and identity-based 'cultural' programmes aimed directly and almost exclusively at Dalits, the party succeeded in raising political consciousness and enlarging its base over every election during the 1990s. Undoubtedly many of these programmes can be described as mere symbolism. While in power the BSP spent considerable resources on programmes aimed at providing self-respect and empowerment which have emptied the coffers of the state without dealing with the longer term disadvantages faced by particularly the poorer sections of the Dalits. Yet, the important political position

gained by the BSP is seen from the fact that no government could be formed without its participation during the decade and all parties were keen to gain the support of the Dalits and overcome their image as upper-caste parties. The BSP has succeeded in carving out a place for itself not only within the state but also in national politics, which is seen from the attempts by both the Congress and the BJP to form an alliance with it. In short, the BSP has been able to carve out a seminal position in politics within a short period due to its strategies of political empowerment.

In MP the Congress Party under Digvijay Singh managed to defeat the BJP in 1993 and to retain power throughout the 1990s. But despite strenuous efforts the party has not been able to resume its earlier position of dominance, which was based on the support of the weaker sections particularly the Dalits and tribals. The Congress remained under constant pressure from both the BJP and the BSP during the 1990s. The rising vote share of the BSP indicates that in spite of the BD, the Congress was not able to make significant inroads into the Dalit vote in the 1990s, particularly in the northern districts. The BSP managed to retain a position between the Congress and the BJP, and in the recent 2003 State Assembly elections has spread into more areas in MP. In fact, the recent elections indicate that the Congress Party has not been able to successfully compete with both the BJP and the BSP for Dalit votes. Our study shows that many of the programmes for Dalits and weaker sections were well conceived. But their impact due to poor implementation has been slow and halting, and in some cases ineffective. The political gains for the Congress Party have not been commensurate with the efforts made for the underprivileged in the state. This will undoubtedly affect the position of the party vis-a-vis the BJP in the national arena.

Thus, our study shows that mobilisation is a tool or strategy used by parties to meet new exigencies that arise

within the political arena, and at different points of time different ones meet with success. The end of the era of broad aggregative parties that attracted all sections of the electorate, and the appearance of narrower parties with sectarian bases, has introduced various pressures and pulls, which have increased during the 1990s. As our study shows the necessities of democratic politics have been instrumental in shaping the developmental agenda of the BSP and the Congress in UP and MP. On the one hand, identity politics in UP with its emphasis on self-respect and 'difference' does not directly address the economic deprivation of Dalits. On the other hand, promises were made in MP to the deprived sections in spite of the inability of the state to meet them due to both financial and bureaucratic constraints. In both cases despite the formulation of agendas for Dalit uplift, the aim is to gain their political support for managing the more demanding and competitive arenas that have emerged in the Indian states.

KHAIRLANJI AND ITS AFTERMATH

*Exploding Some Myths**

ANAND TELTUMBDE

The cases of recent atrocities reflect a qualitative change in the mode of perpetration as well as their intensity—they tend to be committed by collectives in a grotesque celebratory mode. Take the case of Jhajjar in Haryana where five Dalits were lynched to death on 15 October 2002 by a crowd of caste Hindus in broad daylight and within the police premises, with police officials standing by as mute spectators to the ghastly act. There is a sense of defiance and self-assurance on the part of the perpetrators associated with recent crimes. The Jhajjar incident was publicly justified as a well-deserved punishment to the victims.¹ So was the case in Bhutegaon in the Marathwada region of Maharashtra in May 2003,² in which a youth was burnt alive by a crowd of caste Hindus; or of Sonnakhota in Beed district, around the same time, where again a crowd of caste Hindus chased a poor Dalit and stoned him to death.³ There is a discernible increase in the intensity of atrocities in recent years, which may be explained to some extent by their being committed by a collective. The cruelty displayed in certain recent caste atrocities defies human imagination. The details of the torture inflicted on the Bhotmange family in Khairlanji cannot be believed to be an act of human beings—mother and daughter being paraded naked to the village centre, the genitals of the boys being crushed with stones, the two women being gangraped to death, the corpses callously thrown into a canal.

The dispute over the passage through Bhotmange land provided a backdrop to the incident, no doubt, but this does not explain the atrocity, particularly the ferocity of it. The land dispute goes back 17 years in time, when Bhaiyalal Bhotmange had moved with his family to Khairlanji to cultivate five acres of land that he bought near the village of his in-laws.⁴ The land, which was used as a common passage by the villagers as long as it was uncultivated, became unavailable to villagers thereafter. The matter had gone to revenue court, but eventually Bhaiyalal Bhotmange emerged unscathed with the support of Siddharth Gajbhiye, a well-to-do cousin of Surekha, Bhaiyalal's wife, who was also a police patil⁵ of his village. The injury to the caste pride of the caste Hindus simmered and grew with the increasing assertiveness of Bhotmanges, which was perceived to be partly due to their upward economic mobility and cultural progress, the latter in terms of the educational achievements of the Bhotmange children, and partly to the support of Gajbhiye. The villagers grudged Gajbhiye's visits to Khairlanji, alleging an illicit relation between him and Surekha Bhotmange, and thrashed him on 3 September. In the case filed by him, where Surekha and her daughter stood witness, 12 local persons were arrested. On obtaining bail, on 29 September last year they carried out the attack on the Bhotmanges with the support of entire caste Hindu population. While the origin of dispute thus appears to be land, the caste prejudice of the caste Hindu villagers played a major role, right from the articulation of dispute through the development and eventual precipitation into a heinous crime.

COMPLICITY OF THE STATE MACHINERY

Structurally speaking, in examining a caste atrocity one has to take cognisance of the existing social relational disequilibria between caste Hindus and Dalits, as also the

protective mechanism in favour of the Dalits, which is mandated in the Constitution, should this disequilibria precipitate into injustice. The disequilibria in social relations is intrinsic to caste society, and can only be contained so long as Dalits submit to the humiliating demands of the caste Hindus, or the latter are so enlightened as to treat Dalits as equals, which however is only a hypothetical possibility. The social relational dynamics is normally mediated by the perceived strength of each group. The state can play an instrumental role in enhancing the perception of Dalit strength by its protective measures. But the record of atrocities on Dalits reflects the utter failure of the state in the discharge of its constitutional responsibility.⁶ The state has only faithfully served the ruling classes, whose vested interests are in preserving the existing caste divide, even accentuating it. Partly following from this, and partly due to its dominant upper-caste orientation, the state has never made a sincere effort to arrest impending caste atrocities. On the contrary, it has mostly been complicit with the perpetrators of such crimes.

The state's complicity has manifested even in its post-atrocity dealings in refusing to register the case, or, if registered, in not conducting proper investigation, and thereby weakening the case in the court of law. If the state had performed its role even reasonably well, it may be argued, the menace of caste atrocities would have abated substantially by now. Unfortunately, the incidence of caste atrocities has been growing with the passage of time.[...]

TREACHEROUS ROLE OF THE POLICE

The insidious role the police played in the making of Khairlanji and then suppressing it is quite representative of caste crimes anywhere. Khairlanji is a village of 800 people in which just three households are of neo-Buddhists (Dalits)

and seven households are of Gonds (tribals), who in Vidarbha more or less identify with the caste Hindus, the balance population belonging to the Kunbi, Kalar, Teli, Lodhi, Dhivar, Vadhai and other *jatis*, which fall under the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) category, but serve as upper caste vis-a-vis Dalits in a village setting. In such circumstances, Dalits will never come out in open conflict with caste Hindus unless there is a grave enough reason. The land dispute that triggered a saga of the Bhotmanges getting ostracised was not unknown to the local police. While resisting the passage of caste Hindus across his fields, Bhaiyalal Bhotmange was once beaten, for which he had complained to the police.⁷ In 2002, Surekha had complained against a neighbouring farmer, Shivshankar Atilkar for trespassing on her farmland and abusing her in 'casteist' tones. In 2004, though the re-measurement of the farmland confirmed the case of the Bhotmanges in a revenue court, in order to buy peace, Bhotmange, with the mediation of Siddharth Gajbhiye, conceded a small passage through the farm. But this conciliatory measure on his part did not stop harassment. Priyanka, Surekha's daughter, was teased and verbally harassed by passing lewd remarks while she cycled to school. Once she had reported such harassment to Siddharth Gajbhiye, who reprimanded the caste Hindus but advised the Bhotmanges not to formally complain to the police. One complaint on record with the police is of Surekha being attacked with a sickle by some caste Hindu women. Indeed, there appears to be a series of incidents that were reported to the police but there was absolutely no action taken.

The Bhotmanges had the support of Siddharth Gajbhiye, and so the Khairlanji villagers decided to teach him a lesson. On 3 September last year, under the alibi of a dispute over wages to be paid to farm labourers, some of them caught and beat him unconscious. The following day

his brother Rajendra went to the Andhalgaon police station to report the incident but was arrogantly turned away. Siddharth was admitted to a Kamptee hospital, where the police registered his complaint and transferred the case to the Andhalgaon police station on jurisdictional grounds. As the Andhalgaon police came to take the statements of Surekha and Priyanka, the witnesses named in the complaint, the sarpanch and upsarpanch of Khairlanji had threatened to kill them, and that too, in the very presence of the police. On 21 September, Rajendra was similarly threatened at Kandri village. The next day he was involved in a skirmish, for which he had made a complaint to the police, but there was no action. The police arrested 12 people for beating Siddharth Gajbhiye but they were released on bail on 29 September. It is said that as a witness Surekha took advantage of the opportunity and included some of her old enemies in the list of 12 accused. After the return of these accused, the caste Hindus called a meeting and decided to teach a lesson to Siddharth Gajbhiye and the Bhotmange family. When Surekha learnt of this,⁸ she informed Siddharth Gajbhiye and her nephew Rashtrapal Narnaware in Warti village over her cellphone.

Each of the above complaints qualified to be registered under Scheduled Caste (SC)/Scheduled Tribe (ST) (Prevention of Atrocities) Act (PoA Act), but none was so registered. Even the case of beating of Siddharth Gajbhiye in Khairlanji that culminated in the gory carnage was deemed not fit enough to be registered under the PoA Act. Had the police taken due cognisance of these preceding disputes, one could argue, that Khairlanji could have been averted. It is the complicity of the police that has led to caste Hindus mustering courage to punish the Bhotmanges for upholding their dignity and self-respect.

When the mob actually attacked, Surekha had called Rajendra Gajbhiye on her cell to seek police help. Rajendra

immediately called the police but they did not pay any heed. Mysteriously, the sim card of Surekha's cellphone went missing. Rajendra then rushed to Khairlanji and after witnessing the attack again called the police on his cellphone. Bhaiyalal, who saw the attack, ran to Siddharth to save himself. Siddharth immediately called the police and requested for help. The torture of the Bhotmanges lasted for more than two hours thereafter. The police, located just eight km away, could have easily reached there in less than 20 minutes, but they chose not to. Bhaiyalal and Gajbhiye personally reached the Andhalgaon police station to report the incident but the police did not register it and instead sent a constable to Khairlanji when everything was over. The constable just met the sarpanch and returned reporting that everything was normal. It was only the next day, when Bhaiyalal went with Gajbhiye and his uncle to the police station that an FIR was registered. When in the morning of 30 September the body of Priyanka was recovered from the canal and her cousin Rashtrapal identified her, the police recorded it in their inquest as 'unidentified and unclaimed' and sent it for post-mortem. The post-mortem was carried out shoddily and the body disposed off. The next day, the other three bodies were recovered, but they were also similarly disposed off. The evidence as such was effectively destroyed.

The information provided by the police to the press was obviously prompted by the schemers—that the Bhotmanges were killed over the issue of an illicit relationship. The strategy appeared to have worked to the extent that none among the large congregation of Dalits gathered to commemorate the 50th year of conversion of Babasaheb Ambedkar on 2 October at Diksha Bhoomi at Nagpur noted the news. It was not even noted by the next congregation on 14 October that followed the English calendar in observing the anniversary.[...]

Apart from the entire police machinery, the doctors who helped suppress this incident by their acts of commission and omission, the public prosecutor who inexplicably advised against the PoA Act being applied, in short, the entire state apparatus has actively contributed to the making of Khairlanji.

THE AFTERMATH

What followed Khairlanji was equally grave. As the information on the gruesome murders began leaking out of the fact-finding reports and spreading around, it created revulsion among certain sections of the Dalit community. The first reaction was to come out in protest on to the streets; a women's organisation, the Rashtriya Sambuddha Mahila Sanghtana in Bhandara, took out a massive rally on 1 November. This rally provided inspiration to others to organise protests in various towns and cities. Soon, the entire Vidarbha region reverberated with protests. It is notable that almost everywhere Dalit women had taken a lead. The people, particularly youngsters supported these efforts and poured out on to the streets in large numbers. These were genuine protesters who did not have the usual support system that the established political parties have. Most people were educated individuals, employed or otherwise, who were impelled to express their moral outrage against the criminals of Khairlanji and police complicity in the crime. However, the police everywhere cracked down on them with a heavy hand, as though they were bigger criminals than the perpetrators of Khairlanji. At most places the protesters were brutally beaten. At least one person was killed and several injured when police opened fire in Amravati. As an all-India fact-finding committee that visited Nagpur, Kamptee, Amravati, Akola and Yavatmal, where significant police action had taken

place, reported that the use of force by the police was unwarranted and reflected an anti-Dalit bias.[...]

There was an unprecedented attempt to counter the Dalit protests by encouraging others to come into the streets in opposition. Right from the Bhandara rally, this pattern was evident. Supporters of the Bajrang Dal, the Shiv Sena and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came into the streets raising the issue of Ankita Lanjewar, who was raped and killed by a Dalit in Lakhandur. The police wanted to justify its repression by giving it a communal colour. The firing at Amravati was actually justified under this alibi by none other than the police commissioner. At Sholapur, supporters of the combine clashed with Dalits, with the police taking a completely partisan stand, unleashing repression on the Dalits. The police entered Dalit colonies and battered people, including women and girl children. They smashed the framed pictures of Ambedkar and Buddha, and abused the people in the most filthy casteist language. In contrast, no action was taken against the Bajrang Dal/Shiv Sena attackers.[...]

Before the fire over Khairlanji could be doused, the news of desecration of a statue in Kanpur came in, giving rise to a new wave of violent protests in Maharashtra.[...] The spate of spontaneous protests over the desecration of the statue of Ambedkar stunned many people because these took place in distant Maharashtra and not in the state where the desecration happened. While this could be easily explained by the immediate context of Khairlanji or the difference in degree of devotion among Dalits vis-a-vis Ambedkar in Maharashtra and elsewhere, these protests exposed the nature of Dalit consciousness, which could be an eye-opener for the Dalit movement. While in the case of Khairlanji, where four hapless persons were brutally killed in what could be called a pure caste atrocity, it took over a month for the protests to erupt, in contrast, the news of the desecration of Ambedkar's statue evoked an instantaneous

response. News of the desecration of a statue evokes an immediate public outrage but not that of the brutal killing of human beings. The gruesome killings in Jhajjar or burning down of 70 Dalit houses in Gohana, both in Haryana, surprisingly did not evoke any reaction in Maharashtra. Why, even in the wake of Khairlanji, there were a spate of atrocities in Maharashtra itself, which significantly included the brutal cutting into pieces of a Dalit farm labourer in Jahangir Moha village of Beed district of Marathwada in November or the killing of a youth belonging to the matang caste in Umarga Narangwadi in October. But both these atrocities did not create even a ripple among Dalits. Outrage over Ambedkar statues, however, is legion; recall, for instance, the Ramabai Nagar incident that took a toll of 10 lives in police firing and self-killing in protest of a revolutionary Dalit poet, Vilas Ghogre.

It seems that Dalits are more concerned with symbolic identity issues than with what happens to the living members of their community. On the positive side, the Ambedkar statue symbolises the loftiest legacy of Dalit struggle, which should inspire generations of Dalits to take this struggle further, but on the negative side, Ambedkar could become just a godhead, like *vithoba* or *mhasoba*, that could enslave their spirits. Considering the state of Dalit masses, the latter is more likely to happen. None other than the ruling classes understood this and decided to promote it; the more the creed of the Ambedkar statue takes root, the more would Ambedkar's ideals be rooted out. Khairlanji serves as one more reminder for Dalits to rethink these matters.[...]

IRRELEVANCE OF THE DALIT POLITICIANS

The identity orientation of Dalits serves a politics that does not have anything to offer Dalits other than empty slogans

and hollow symbols. Intrinsically incapable of comprehending and confronting the real-life problems of Dalits, the politicians embracing the politics of identity abide by the practices of the ruling class political parties to maintain the vacuous character of Dalit politics. The Poona Pact of 1932 had deprived them of the possibility of independent representation on the basis of a communitarian identity. The possibility of an alternative politics, involving alliances with the working class as a whole and the communist parties and embracing the politics of class, was not as easy as identity politics and did not attract Dalit politicians aiming at a quick buck. The result was that Dalit politics and politicians got subsumed as adjuncts of the ruling class parties for which symbols and identities mattered more than the material interests of the people.

Khairlanji conclusively exposes the bankruptcy of Dalit politics and politicians. The absence of these politicians in Khairlanji was as conspicuous as in all the earlier incidents of atrocities on Dalits. It is significant that Dalit politics, whose *raison d'être* is to safeguard Dalit interests against caste discrimination, is not concerned with atrocities on Dalits, which are the concentrated expression of casteism. This is because Dalit politicians cannot afford to embarrass their ruling class political patrons. In the case of Khairlanji, it is said that one senior Dalit politician had deliberately ensured that the news of Khairlanji was suppressed so that the celebrations of 50th anniversary of the 'Dharmachakra Pravartan Din', which has been reduced over the years to an event for self promotion, passes on without any disturbance. Some politicians pursuing the ephemeral caste-based bahunism could not figure out what stand to take when they found that kunbis and kalars were pitted against the Dalits. Reared on anti-brahmin symbolism, they are intellectually so bereft as not to see that atrocities on Dalits are mostly committed by the backward castes who

have assumed the baton of brahminism during the post-Independence period.

The protesters over Khairlanji, therefore, zealously kept away the entire set of mainstream politicians from their midst. The anger of Dalit protesters was as much against the perpetrators of crime as it was against the complicity of the state and the Dalit politicians, whom they held primarily responsible for such an occurrence. Khairlanji, and for that matter all caste atrocities, are a reflection of the impairment of the political strength of Dalits for which Dalit politicians have to take blame. When after the mass upsurge these politicians awkwardly tried to rush in to take the credit, they were utterly ignored.... Indeed, Khairlanji has taken this divide between the Dalit politicians and the Dalit masses to a new high.

MYTHS AND MYTHOLOGIES

Khairlanji exploded many myths and mythologies that continue to shroud the reality of the caste question and thereby obfuscate its objective solution. Some of the obvious myths that got exploded is the myth that economic development does away with caste; that Maharashtra is a progressive state; that a significant progressive section of non-Dalits is against the caste system; that Dalits in the bureaucracy can orient the administration to do justice to Dalits; and finally the mythology of *bahujanwad* developed by the late Kanshiram and followed by others.

Many intellectuals hold the notion that economic development will eradicate caste. They correlate economic development with educational and cultural development and, therefore, imagine that the irrationality of caste would be eradicated through it. Khairlanji certainly refutes all these notions. In economic terms, the village of Khairlanji is far better than the average village in Maharashtra. Even the economic position of the Bhotmanges, who owned five

acres of irrigated land, can be similarly taken as better than that of the average Dalit household. Even educationally, the village may not be inferior to an average village in the state. In such a situation it is not development itself but the manner in which its unequal and uneven nature buttresses casteism that needs to be examined.

There is an associated myth about Maharashtra being a progressive state that is built upon its economic development, particularly around the Mumbai-Pune region, which significantly elevates the economic position of the state relative to others. Another factor that contributes to this myth is the origin of the non-brahmin and Dalit movements in the state by Jotiba Phule and Babasaheb Ambedkar respectively. The empirical reality, however, is quite contrary—Maharashtra is as casteist as any other state. It has an inglorious track record of heinous atrocities perpetrated on Dalits. Maharashtra ranks 10th among 35 states for crimes committed against SCs and STs in 2005,⁹ which clearly indicates that it does not have much reason to be complacent. But this myth makes Maharashtra complacent. It dampens the need for special efforts by the state and civil society to fight caste consciousness. As one of the most barbaric caste atrocities that best exposes the factors that go into their making, Khairlanji conclusively explodes this myth.

It is a popular myth that there exists a significant progressive section of non-Dalits that is against caste. There indeed is a large section of people who hold progressive ideas on many other social issues, such as communalism, gender discrimination, exploitation of labour and the peasantry, and so on. However, when it comes to caste, they conveniently leave it for Dalits to deal with. When Khairlanji protests broke out, they should have come forward to express their support to Dalits. After all, it was

apolitical and organised by people who in some way shared their progressivism. Why then were they not there?...

Importantly, Khairlanji also blasts the myth that if Dalit individuals are placed in the bureaucratic structure, it becomes more congenial to Dalits. Khairlanji best exemplifies the complicity of the state machinery in the perpetration of caste atrocities, even when this machinery is largely manned by the people of the Dalit community. The superintendent of police, Bhandara; the deputy superintendent of police; the PSI of Andhalgaon police station, and a constable under him; the doctor who performed the post-mortems; the district civil surgeon who permitted the doctor to go ahead with the post-mortems without a lady doctor; the public prosecutor who advised against the application of the PoA Act to the earlier cases which were essentially caste-based; and finally, the nodal officer at the apex level who is entrusted with the responsibility of reviewing the state of crimes against SCs and STs in accordance with the PoA Act—they were all Dalits belonging to the same sub-castes as the Bhotmanges.¹⁰ Nobody will fault this combination but the fact is that the entire network failed at every possible step. It is naïve to believe that a Dalit individual rising up the bureaucratic or governmental structure could influence it to be pro-Dalit. On the contrary, the rise of such an individual is basically a reward for the proven service rendered by him/her to the system and the latter expects more of the same from him/her in the future.[...]

Above all, Khairlanji explodes the mythology of bahujanwad, developed and practised by the late Kanshiram with a reasonable level of success. Dalit politicians such as Prakash Ambedkar, Udit Raj, and many others are following bahujanwad, but without acknowledging his debt. Bahujanwad is basically an expedient electoral strategy of the lower castes for creating

a middle-caste identity, as successfully done by Sharad Pawar or Mulayam Singh. It assumes that the lower Shudra castes and Dalits can come together and create a formidable constituency to bid for power. Indeed, purely from the standpoint of their material status, all these castes are placed similarly and there is no doubt that they should come together. But when bahujanwad aspires to unite them on the basis of caste identities, it ignores the fundamental break that divides them into castes and non-castes. This divide can only be crossed if one transcends it with an entirely different approach, the class approach that emphasises their similarities. Khairlanji, and for that matter every caste atrocity, confuses bahujanwad because these atrocities are invariably committed by the so-called OBCs.

COMPARATIVE CONTEXTS
OF DISCRIMINATION*Caste and Untouchability in South Asia**

SURINDER S. JODHKA AND GHANSHYAM SHAH

Based on empirical studies carried out in Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka during 2007-08, this essay offers a brief introduction to the prevailing Dalit situation in the four countries and identifies specific problems of social inequality and deprivation of Dalit groups in these countries (see Bhattachan et al. 2008; Chowdhury 2008; Silva et al. 2008; and Shah 2008).[...]

(Despite problems with official recognition and data sources) it will perhaps be safe to assume that the four countries of south Asia have a population ranging from 15 per cent to 25 per cent which experience caste-based prejudice and discrimination, which in turn also produces poverty and social exclusion of some communities.

CASTE MEANS DISCRIMINATION

As the detailed reports of the four countries and other writings on the subject show, there is enough qualitative evidence to suggest that caste differences exist in these four countries of south Asia. Further, they exist not simply in terms of distinctive group identities or ethnic difference, reproduced through caste endogamy; but also in terms of hierarchy and ideas of purity and pollution. Interestingly, in some ways, there seem to be striking similarities across different regions of the subcontinent in the manner in which caste-based deprivation is reproduced on ground. However, the four reports also bring out significant

differences in the nature and extent of discrimination across the four countries and among different communities within the countries.

One of the most striking features of south Asia is the association of Dalit communities with certain types of jobs. For example, the cleaning of streets and latrines, dealing with dead animals, casual and bonded labour on land are almost everywhere identified with Dalit communities. Not only are these low status jobs, invariably they are also low paid jobs. Another common feature of Dalit life in these four countries is their residential segregation. They seem to be either living in segregated settlements away from the main village, or in the urban slums where living conditions are generally poor. The experience of untouchability and discrimination was also a shared reality but its details varied.

Nepal

Of the four south Asian countries, Nepal is the only one (apart from India) which recognises the reality of caste. Quite like India, Nepal has an official commission, the National Dalit Commission (NDC) that was set up in 2002. The NDC performs the kinds of functions that the Scheduled Castes Commission does in India. The commission has identified 22 groups as Dalits with sub-castes within them. These communities continue to experience untouchability in some form or the other. Though some of them live in mixed localities, they mostly live in segregated settlements in rural and urban centres of Nepal. Untouchability continues to be widely practised in religious and socio-cultural sites against some of these caste groups. For example, it is still very difficult for most Dalits to marry outside their communities. Some of the Dalit castes are denied entry into Hindu temples. They are also not permitted to eat with others during festivals and weddings. Similarly, they are denied free access to public

sources of drinking water. As many as 17 of 18 Dalit castes interviewed for the Nepal study reported that if they touched water filled by the non-Dalits, the latter threw away the water. They are not allowed to touch the tap. If they wish to collect water they are required to wait for a non-Dalit to fill water for them, while they are made to stand at a distance from the public water source.

Thanks to the growing influence of the Dalit movements and Maoist insurgency, caste-based discrimination has been declining in Nepal. Caste-based discrimination is comparatively less in urban areas. However, it has not gone away. For example, one of the issues raised recently by Dalit movements in Nepal was about the discrimination against Dalits in collection of milk. Some of them still find it hard to sell milk to vendors because of their caste. Similarly, untouchability can be experienced in tea-shops and at restaurants.

Some Dalit communities also reported prejudice and discrimination in provision of health services. In this context, Nepal seems very similar to India. Given that a large majority of Dalits are also poor, they find it hard to access private healthcare and the state-supported health services are not good enough. The story of education also seems similar. Despite state policy and concerted efforts by some activist groups, Dalit enrolment continues to be quite low. Though less than in the past, some communities reported caste-based segregation in schools. Dalit children were treated differently by teachers as well as their peers. Teachers used derogatory words for Dalits and made them sit on the back benches. Given their economic weaknesses, many Dalit children drop out of school and join their parents in their struggle for earning a livelihood.

Sri Lanka

While the presence of caste is widely recognised in Nepal, it is a taboo in contemporary Sri Lanka. Interestingly, caste

was the primary category of classification in the region and was used in all regional censuses until 1871 when it was replaced by race and nationalities for classification of Sri Lankan population. Even though the colonial regimes did not see Sri Lanka as being a caste society, it nevertheless worked with the idea of caste for many different ways, including selecting suitable officials for administration of the countryside, tax collection, and even in recruiting and managing workers in the plantation economy developed by them (Silva et al. 2008).

Though the caste system is relatively less rigid in Sri Lanka, it continues to be a core feature of its social structure. Kalinga Tudor Silva and his colleagues identify three parallel caste systems being practised by the three major ethnic groups of the country, viz. the Buddhist Sinhalas (around 74 per cent of the total population), the Sri Lankan Tamils and the Indian Tamils (together making for around 20 per cent of the total population). Each of these is based on some idea of hierarchy and discrimination. While the importance of caste has, indeed, diminished over the years, some pockets of caste discrimination continue to exist. Sri Lanka also has witnessed certain new forms of caste discrimination which have emerged in the plantation economy, sanitary and scavenging services, and more recently, in the context of civil war and tsunami rehabilitation.

The pre-colonial Sri Lankan state was built around caste-based privileges of the ruling elite and hereditary and mandatory caste services of the bottom layers in society. Unlike the Hindu caste system founded on the basis of religious notions of purity and pollution, the caste systems in Sri Lanka have relied more on a kind of secular ranking upheld by the state, landownership and tenure, religious organisations and rituals, and firmly-rooted notions of inherent superiority and inferiority. The official requirement and support to the caste systems has, indeed,

eroded over the years, but the state has also turned a blind eye to the deprivations caused by caste discrimination. The militant Tamil movement led by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) also imposed a ban on the practice of caste for consolidating Tamil identity, which only turned it into a kind of underground reality, not to be confronted openly through politics and policy.[...]

As elsewhere, the system of caste-based hierarchies in Sri Lanka has also seen many changes over the years. Many of the traditionally underprivileged caste groups in Sinhala society have gradually moved up and have improved their living conditions through the opportunities offered by the Sri Lankan welfare state. These opportunities, however, have not evenly benefited all such caste groups or all members within a specific caste group, and there are many depressed caste pockets where poverty, landlessness, low human dignity, unemployment and poor living conditions continue to exist. They also experience caste-like discrimination from other communities and official institutions. The study clearly showed lower educational achievement, extreme poverty, overcrowded settlements, poor asset ownership and pressure to pursue hereditary caste occupations despite a strong dislike for such occupations.

Historically, caste-based divisions and discriminations have been much stronger among the Sri Lankan Tamils in Jaffna where untouchability has a religious sanction. The upper end of the caste hierarchy has traditionally been occupied by the land-owning Vellâlar (Pfaffenberger 1982; Siddhartan 2003; Mahroof 2000) and the bottom end was collectively referred to as *Panchamar*, consisting of *Vannâr* (dhobi, i.e. washerman), *Ampattar* (barber), *Pallar* (landless labourers), *Nalavar* (toddy tappers) and *Parayar* (funeral drummers). They were treated as Untouchables in Jaffna society. Vellâlar have also been numerically predominant in the peninsula (around 50 per cent), while the

panchamars were around 18 per cent of the Jaffna population. In between vellârlars and panchamars were several intermediary caste groups, which also experienced some kind of discrimination but were not treated as outcaste or Untouchables.

Panchamars were prohibited from wearing respectable clothing, denied access to public transport, drinking water, temples and tea shops. Beginning with the 1920s, the region also witnessed Dalit movements demanding 'equality in seating and eating for school children', the Teashop Entry Movement in the 1950s and the Temple Entry Movement in the 1960s. These campaigns sometimes also resulted in violent clashes between vellârlars and panchamars and achieved a measure of success in reducing manifest forms of caste discrimination. However, by the 1970s, these struggles were given up. The rise of Tamil identity politics sought to unify all Tamils, irrespective of caste, class and other divisions in their struggle against the Sinhala-dominated state. Though Tamil militancy enabled the non-vellârlar groups to assert themselves politically, the Eelam struggle also silenced the caste struggle in the interest of the 'national liberation struggle'. Caste was officially banned but caste discrimination did not disappear (Schalk 1992, 1997).

The third category of the population where caste continues to be a predominant mode of social organisation is that of the 'Indian Tamils'. They are called Indians because they were taken to Sri Lanka by the British rulers from southern India during the middle of the nineteenth century to work in tea/coffee plantations. Though politically a marginal group, they make for more than 6 per cent (roughly 1.3 millions) of the total population of the country and nearly 80 per cent of them continue to be a part of the plantation economy.

While establishing plantations, the colonial rulers almost re-established the caste-based division. Those who were

taken for labouring jobs were mostly from Dalit caste groups, while the supervisory work was invariably given to the non-Dalits. Similarly, some of the low status jobs, such as sanitary labour or washing of clothes were treated as caste occupation in the plantations. A large majority of them being Hindus, their ritual life also reinforced hierarchy.

Though caste divisions continue, caste-based discrimination appears to have progressively weakened among the plantation workers. There are two sectors where elements of caste-based discrimination continue. First, the trade unions are mostly controlled by high castes in the plantation community in spite of the workforce being predominantly of Dalit background. There are also urban communities of sanitary labourers of Indian Tamil origin who continue to experience a degree of social exclusion due to a combination of factors, which include their ethnic, caste and occupational backgrounds and their concentration in ghetto-like crowded urban settlements.

BANGLADESH AND PAKISTAN

The other two countries, Pakistan and Bangladesh, not only have a shared political history among themselves but also with India. However, even though a large geographical area of the two countries, in a sense, shared a cultural history with present-day India, their contemporary social and political realities are imagined very differently from the Indian side. For example, while caste figures quite prominently in colonial accounts of the united Punjab and it continues to be used as a category of demographic classification and social policy in the Indian Punjab, discourse on caste is almost completely missing in the Pakistani Punjab. Same could be said about some other parts of Pakistan (such as Sindh) and Bangladesh.

Though predominantly a Muslim populated country (90 per cent), Bangladesh also has a good number of Hindus (around 9 per cent). More than the religious demographics, the social organisation of the region resembles closely with neighbouring India. For example, the village settlements in Bangladesh are quite like those on the Indian side, in West Bengal and other parts of eastern India. As in a typical Indian village these settlements are divided on caste lines and Dalits are invariably made to live outside the boundary of the main village. Even in urban and semi-urban settlements there are localities named after the predominant occupation of their residents, such as *harijan patti*, *bede* colony and sweeper colony.

Culturally also, south Asian Islam has its own notion of hierarchy, which divided people into caste like status groups, such as Ajlaf, Afzal and Arzals. Quite like the Hindu caste system, these divisions are based on some notion of purity and pollution. South Asian Islam also practises a notion of endogamy which reinforces caste-like group divisions. And most importantly, a large number of communities in Bangladesh remain associated with their hereditary occupations which carry a status group identity.

Most of the Hindu Dalits of Bangladesh are believed to be descendants of migrants from the Indian side of the subcontinent, from the current states of Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh. They were first taken to the city of Dhaka by the Mughal rulers in the early seventeenth century. However, a larger number of them came during the first half of the nineteenth century when the British rulers brought them for various kinds of menial services.

Though Bangladesh was formed as a secular, democratic country in 1971 after it separated from Pakistan, it has, over the years developed strong majoritarian tendencies, which have taken the form of institutionalised discrimination against the Hindu minority. Dalits, who

make for nearly one-fourths to one-fifth of the Bangladeshi Hindu population, become double victims of Islamic majoritarianism as well as caste untouchability. Their representation in the political institutions is abysmally low. Their economic conditions are predictably bad with most of them working in low paying traditional caste occupations. Our study revealed that a large proportion of them received below the officially prescribed minimum wage. Nearly three-fourths of the surveyed respondents earned less than 5,000 Takka in a month (less than \$75 per month). Nearly two-thirds of them, both Hindu and Muslim Dalits have had no education. They live in temporary (*kacha*) houses made of bamboo and they have poor access to water, sanitation and other public services. Interestingly, the survey showed that the condition of Muslim Dalits was worse than those of the Hindu Dalits. While 75 per cent of the Hindu Dalits lived in kacha houses, the number of Muslim Dalits in the category was above 90 per cent.

Dalits in Bangladesh also face discrimination in the political sphere as well as in civic life. Many of them reported that they were not treated well even by the doctors and nurses in hospitals and clinics. They were also not allowed entry into their houses. The Hindu Dalits faced much more discrimination in religious life. They were not allowed entry into temples and were discouraged from participating in religious/community functions. Though in the past some sections of the Muslim Dalit communities, such as the Lalbegi, Abdal and Bediya (popularly known as arzal) engaged in occupations such as toilet cleaning and garbage collection, were often not allowed entry into mosques, there seemed to be no such restriction in place any longer. However, otherwise, the condition of the Muslim Dalits did not seem to be any better than those of the Hindu Dalits. The number of Muslim Dalits complaining about the practice of untouchability against them in tea shops was much higher (around 40 per cent) than the

Hindu Dalits (around 15 per cent). The same was the case with having access to hotel rooms. Access to water from public and private sources was also denied to both categories of Dalits.

Schools have been reported to be important sites of caste discrimination by the literature on untouchability in India. This seems to be true for other countries of south Asia as well. Bangladesh, where our team looked at the issue more closely, found strong evidence of discrimination against Dalit children, of both Hindu and Muslim background. They were treated differently by teachers and found it hard to play with children from other castes/communities. In many places they are not allowed to drink water from common sources and are discouraged to participate in cultural activities and sports. Surprisingly, in schools also the Muslims Dalit children seem to be facing more discrimination than the Hindu Dalits.

Pakistan also has many similarities with Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. Though caste is one of the core social institutions, its presence is rarely acknowledged in the official discourses on poverty, development or human rights. Hindus make for a little less than 2 per cent of the total population of Pakistan. Besides, Pakistan also has around 1.6 per cent of a Christian population. The overwhelming majority population (nearly 95 per cent) of the country is of believers in Islam. This religion is also its professed political ideology. The two-nation theory, which provided justification for the formation of a separate Pakistan, was premised on the fact that socially and culturally south Asian Muslims were different from the Hindus. While Hindus believed in caste hierarchy, Muslims were all equal and hence constituted a separate nation. Even today this remains a core of the official doctrine of the Pakistani state.

Caste and religion have always been interwoven in complex ways. While Hinduism has often been seen, and

rightly so, to provide a theological justification to caste hierarchy, the Pakistani state uses Islamic identity and ideology to completely deny the presence of caste in the social and economic life of country even when caste-based identities and caste-related discrimination are quite rampant in the country, including among the Muslims. Such official denial of caste also works to the double disadvantage of the Hindu and Christian Dalits of Pakistan. While being members of a small religious minority, they confront a hostile majoritarian state and civil society; being Dalits they also remain marginalised within their own religious communities.

The representatives of Hindu SCs have often contested this and have claimed to be much larger in numbers than officially reported. They are mostly concentrated in the Sindh region and nearly 93 per cent of them live in rural areas. As expected, a large majority of them do not own agricultural land or other employment/income generating assets. They mostly work as tenants and attached labourers (*haris*) with big landowners. While the system of attached labour has undergone a lot of change in India, social relations of production in Sindh and some other parts of Pakistan continue to be of pre-capitalist nature with widespread use of unfree labour. A large majority of rural Dalits, Hindus and Muslims continue to work as bonded slaves with the big landowners, particularly in the provinces of Sindh and Punjab. Even those who migrate in search of livelihood end up with debts and bondage-type relations.

A survey conducted among the Hindu SCs of Sindh revealed that nearly 85 per cent of them earn less than 3,000 Pakistani rupees (around \$36) per month, far below the official minimum wage of Rs 4,600. Scheduled Caste workers also pointed to widespread discrimination against them. A majority of them (58 per cent) reported that they get less wages than upper-castes Muslim and Hindu

workers for the same type of work. This differential was particularly widespread in the Sindh province.

All these predictably lead to their poor conditions of living. For instance, the study showed that a large majority of them live in kacha houses with poor health. A large majority of them are illiterate and often find it hard to send their children to schools. As is typical of caste societies, Dalits of Pakistan face severe discrimination in everyday life, some of which are common and some others peculiar to the local context. Community-wise segregated housing appears to be a norm in most of the Pakistan. In some areas, the whole village population would be from a particular clan. Similarly, in multi-caste community settlements, status group hierarchy is quite common and visible. In Sindh, for example, most villages have separate *mohallas* of Syeds, who are considered as upper caste and keep themselves at a distance from the other castes. On the other end, Dalit groups like the *Bagris* are made to live on the outskirts of the village because they are considered Untouchable and polluting by the upper-caste Hindus and Muslims. They eat dead animals and their bodies smell and after all they are bagris and non-Muslims. How can we let them live in our mohalla, a Muslim respondent from a Sindh village told our researcher.

They also experience the classical form of untouchability in the public sphere. For example, as many as 77 per cent reported having been denied services of a barber and 90 per cent reported that the local restaurant served them tea and food in separate utensils. Many of them felt that they were harshly treated to the extent of being hated by the dominant groups. Dalit children who go to school are made to sit in the last rows and often treated badly by the teachers.

The burden of caste also has a gender dimension. Besides low wages and difficult living conditions, Dalit women often face sexual assault while they are working in the farms of

rich farmers. There have also been several cases of young Dalit women being abducted and sexually exploited.

Even though the category 'SC' continues to be used in Pakistan, it does not have any special development schemes or programmes for its Dalit population. On the contrary, some of the legal provisions such as the law against blasphemy are often used against members of the religious minorities, Christians and Hindus, by the locally dominant individuals in events of conflict.

CONCLUSION

Social groupings based on their descent, often described as ethnic groups or communities, have existed and continue to exist almost everywhere in the present-day world. With the growing incidence of human migration across countries and continents, such diversity of human groups has only been growing over time. These diverse cultural or ethnic groups do not always co-exist in harmony and often become markers of political identities on the basis of which power is distributed across communities. While such 'minorities' and 'majorities' are a fact of political and social life all over the world, the institution of caste is specific to south Asia, where groups are not only treated differentially but some groups are kept out as 'untouchable' and 'polluting'.

Caste differences are also not simply cultural or economic differences. Caste inequality, as Ambedkar had argued, is graded inequality (Ambedkar 1987; Jaffrelot 2005), where inequality exists at all levels of social groupings. Even those classified as outcaste or Untouchables are also internally divided and unequal. Not only do such differences make it difficult for those at the receiving end of the system to mobilise against the powerful, but it also institutionalises discrimination and exclusion in a much more complicated way. Discrimination becomes a cultural trait in such social formations.

It is in this context that we need to understand the contextual specificity of the category Dalit. It was only when the colonial state classified them under a single category as depressed classes, and later as SCs, that it became possible for them to start imagining themselves as a single political community with a common experience and interest, as Dalits.

However, the colonial constructs and classifications of caste groupings also imposed their own limitations. They identified caste exclusively with Hinduism and India. However, the fact is that caste-culture exists across different countries of south Asia and even among the followers of other religious faith systems. While the extent and form varies, communities are invariably divided on the basis of their birth within a framework of hierarchy where some groups, engaged in 'polluting' occupations, are kept out as Untouchables.

Caste divisions and differences have perhaps not been as strong in countries like Sri Lanka, Bangladesh or Pakistan as they have been in India, or in some of its regions. However, unlike India, there has been no recognition of their special situation as socially excluded and deprived. Since the states in these countries do not recognise caste, they also do not collect data on their numbers and around variables of their economic status. In contrast, the state policies have played a critical role in producing a Dalit elite, which has played an important role in articulating Dalit aspirations and identity. No such process is visible anywhere else in south Asia.[...]

As discussed above, the situation in other south Asian countries is no different. This 'blindness' or non-recognition of caste not only implies an absence of contestations of caste, but also means no state policies and legal provisions that could enable the marginalised caste groups, the Dalits, to become dignified citizens of their countries.... Their vulnerability is compounded by factors, such as

landlessness, poor housing and employment in low-paying occupations.

SECTION

IV

Caste, State and Law

WHO ARE THE OTHER
BACKWARD CLASSES?*An Introduction to
a Constitutional Puzzle**

MARC GALANTER

The Constitution of India authorises special preferential treatment not only for Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs), but for 'other socially and educationally backward classes'. Just who these groups are, how they are to be selected, and what measures the government may take on their behalf are matters surrounded by some uncertainty. In view of the recent upsurge of interest in Other Backward Classes (OBCs), it may be timely to reflect on how this term became a category for public policy in India and what its possible meaning is.... This essay does not attempt to analyse the judicial treatment of the concept, but to sketch the shifting career of the backward classes category....

The OBCs for whom preferential treatment is authorised are not defined in the Constitution, nor is any exclusive method or agency for their designation provided. For all the uncertainty surrounding the term 'Scheduled Castes' (and its predecessor 'Depressed Classes') its central purpose is clear—to identify the victims of 'untouchability'. At the time of Independence, the term 'backward classes' had a less fixed and definite reference. The term had been around for some time.¹ but it had a variety of referents, it had shifted rapidly in meaning and had come to mean different things in different places. For purposes of tracing

these varied meanings in the following discussion, we may portray some of the variety of meanings in schematic form in Box 24.1.[...]

Box 24.1: Various Denotations of the Term 'Backward Classes'

1. As a synonym for Depressed Classes, untouchables, Scheduled Castes.
2. As comprising the Untouchables, aboriginal and hill tribes, criminal tribes, etc.
3. As comprising all communities deserving special treatment, namely those included in (2) above and in addition the lower strata of non-Untouchable communities.
4. As comprising all nontribal (Hindu) communities deserving special treatment.
5. As comprising all communities deserving special treatment *except* the Untouchables.
6. As comprising the lower strata of non-Untouchable communities.
7. As comprising all communities above the Untouchables but below the most 'advanced' communities.
8. As comprising the non-Untouchable communities who were 'backward' in comparison to the highest castes.
9. As comprising all communities other than the highest or most advanced.
10. As comprising all persons who meet given non-communal tests of backwardness (e.g., low income).

[...]Thus, the term had never acquired a definite meaning at the all-India level. There had been no attempt to define it or employ it on the national level and there were no nationwide backward classes' organisations or spokesmen. It had definite meanings in local contexts, although these differed somewhat. After the listing of Scheduled Castes (SCs), the usage as a synonym for Untouchables (Denotation 1) drops away. Two major species of usage emerge: (1) as the more inclusive group of all those who need special treatment (Denotations 3, 9); (2) as a stratum higher than the Untouchables but nonetheless depressed (Denotations 6, 7). This double usage continues today: the former in the usage of backward classes in the wide sense (including SCs and STs); the latter in the usage as equivalent to 'Other Backward Classes'. It is with the latter that we are now concerned here.[...]

It was anticipated, then, that the backward classes other than the SCs and STs were to be designated at the local level. The delegation to local authorities undoubtedly reflected an acceptance (at least temporarily) of the divergence of existing practices, a desire to preserve flexibility, and an awareness of the difficulties of prescribing universally applicable tests of backwardness in view of the varying local conditions. It may also have been presumed that 'backward classes' were sufficiently potent politically to look out for their own interests on a local level, and, unlike SCs and STs, central control of their designation was not required to ensure the inclusion of the deserving. However, the Central government was not entirely excluded from the process. The President is instructed to:

... appoint a Backward Classes Commission to investigate the conditions of socially and educationally backward classes ... and the difficulties under which they labour and to make recommendations as to the steps that should be taken by the Union or any State to remove such difficulties and to improve their condition.... [...]

Examination of the [Constituent Assembly] debate leaves it abundantly clear that the backward classes, by whomever designated and according to whatever tests they were chosen, were expected to be a list of castes or communities. Ambedkar, then law minister, forthrightly observed that the amendment was needed precisely because 'what are called backward classes are ... nothing else but a collection of certain castes'. There was considerable concern that the provision should not permit communal quotas to be enjoyed by more advanced groups. While there was discussion of the economic backwardness of the groups who deserved preferences, it was not merely

the poor that the drafters and speakers had in mind.² (Indeed, if they had, an amendment would hardly have been necessary.) Some speakers argued that preferences should be directed to the economically poor, but the predominant concern was to provide some special treatment to offset and remedy specifically those social inequalities of caste and community which were seen as underlying and compounding economic differences.[...] ³

The Backward Classes Commission was established in 1953 and directed to determine the criteria to be adopted in considering whether any section of the people ... (in addition to) SCs and STs should be treated as socially and educationally backward classes; and, in accordance with such criteria to prepare a list of such classes....

The directions express an expectation of centrally established uniform standards and a central master list of backward classes. Accordingly, the Commission, after two years' work, presented a list of 2,399 backward groups and recommended various measures for their economic, educational, social, cultural and political advancement. It was estimated that these groups comprised a total of more than 116 million members (about 32 per cent of the total population of India). This does not include women as a separate group, although the Commission recommended that all women in India comprised a Backward Class. Nor does it include SCs and STs who in 1951 made up over 14 per cent and 6 per cent respectively of the total population.

It had been generally anticipated (Majumdar 1960: 219; Bose 1967: 188), if not universally approved,⁴ that the 'classes' designated by the Commission would be castes or communities. While indicating its desire to avoid perpetuating evils of caste and its eagerness to avoid caste, the Commission 'found it difficult to avoid caste in the present prevailing conditions'. The Commission felt it was 'not only correct but inevitable' to interpret its terms of

reference 'as mainly relating to social hierarchy based on caste'. As general criteria of backwardness the Commission listed trade and occupation, security of employment, educational attainments, representation in government service and, most emphatically, position in the social hierarchy. It did not use these standards directly to isolate categories of backward persons, but to isolate backward communities. The units to which these tests were applied were for the most part caste and sub-caste groups. In identifying the backward, the Commission used caste in two ways: first, it used caste groups as the units or 'classes' to be classified; and second, it used the position or standing of these groups in the social hierarchy as the principal criterion for determining their backwardness.

In classifying communities, the Commission aimed to take into consideration ... the social position which a community occupies in the caste hierarchy, the percentage of literacy and its general educational advancement; and its representation in government service or in the industrial sphere. The economic backwardness also had to be kept in view ... as also the recent trends in its advancement as a result of various governmental measures ... during the past one or two decades.

The Commission was deluged by communities claiming to be backward. But it found that the paucity of data fully matched the immensity of its task. The state governments were found not to have relevant statistics, administrators and census officers pleaded their 'inability to supply the relevant material', and figures supplied by the communities themselves were chiefly guesswork. The decision to de-emphasise caste in the 1951 Census operations, had left the Commission without any figures on the literacy, income or occupation of the various communities.⁵ The Commission had no facilities for generating data

themselves. In the face of these obstacles, the Commission plowed bravely on:

In the absence of reliable facts and figures, the only course open to us was to rely on the statistics available from the various governments and the previous census reports, and to go by the general impressions of government officers, leaders of public opinion and social workers.

In some cases there was no data at all and 'the decision had to be taken on the strength of the name of the community only, on the principle of giving the benefit of doubt'. The Commission did not undertake to document the application of its tests to the communities on its list, for which it provided only names, traditional occupations and estimated population.

In addition to listing the backward classes, the Commission was instructed to investigate the conditions of all such socially and educationally Backward Classes and the difficulties under which they labour and make recommendations:

- (i) as to the steps that should be taken by the union or any state to remove such difficulties or to improve their conditions;
- (ii) as to the grants that should be made ...

True to its charge, the Commission recommended a vast array of schemes for the protection and advancement of the backward, including a number of major changes in rural life—redistribution of land, protection of tenants, help to the small agriculturalists (credit, price supports, irrigation, etc.). It recommended the creation of a separate ministry for Backward Classes' Welfare. It proposed reservations for backward classes in government service of at least 25 per

cent in Class I, 33 $\frac{1}{3}$ per cent in Class II and 40 per cent in Classes III and IV. In addition, there were various aids to the education of these groups and a reservation of 70 per cent in medical, scientific and technical colleges.

In a last minute volte face, the Chairman virtually repudiated the Commission's work, having concluded that 'it would have been better if we could determine the criteria of backwardness on principles other than caste'. He finds the caste test repugnant to democracy and inimical to the creation of 'a casteless and classless society' (in the then fashionable phrase) by perpetuating and encouraging caste divisions. It is not entirely clear what he would put in its place. He recommends that backwardness be measured by residential, economic, educational and cultural criteria. Apparently he not only repudiates caste standing as the test of backwardness but also the use of caste units. At several places in his covering letter he suggests that only individuals and families should be the units whose backwardness is ascertained. Elsewhere, however, he recommends policies which seem incompatible with this position (e.g., that where an income test is employed, members of backward communities should be given priority).

The Chairman's last minute desertion foreshadowed (and perhaps augmented) the negative reception, that awaited the report.⁶ The spectacle of numerous groups vying to display their backwardness, the feeling that caste classifications were divisive and unfitting, the casualness of the Commission's application of its criteria the vastness of the number it found backward, and the expansiveness of the preferences it proposed, exposed its work to widespread criticism.

The Commission's report was laid on the table of both houses of Parliament on 3 September 1956, accompanied by a withering critique from the Minister of Home Affairs,

expressing disappointment with its criteria and its conclusions. The emphasis on caste, the Minister asserted, displayed the 'dangers of separatism'. Not only was the caste basis unfair to the backward outside these communities, but the caste system was undeniably 'the greatest hindrance in the way of our progress toward an egalitarian society, and the recognition of specified castes as backward may serve to maintain and perpetuate the existing distinctions on the basis of caste'. Commission's standards other than caste were 'obviously vague'. The very expansiveness of the Commission's list undermined its usefulness, for if everyone 'barring a few exceptions, has thus to be regarded as backward, the really needy would be swamped by the multitude and hardly receive any special attention....' Thus, the Commission failed to find 'positive and workable criteria'. 'Further investigations will have to be undertaken so that the deficiencies that have been noticed in the findings of the Commission are made good and the problem is solved with due regard to the requirements of Article 340....' The state governments were requested *to* undertake *ad hoc* surveys to determine the numbers of backward classes and in the meantime to 'give all reasonable facilities' to the backward classes 'in accordance with their existing lists and also to such others who in their opinion deserve to be considered as socially and educationally backward in the existing circumstances'. Thus, the matter went back to the states: the Commission's report remained on the table, and in spite of occasional agitations, was not taken up by Parliament until 1965.[...]

By the beginning of the 1960s the tide was running strongly against definition of the backward classes by community. Opposition within the government, was augmented by criticism from academics and much of the national press, who voiced a common suspicion of the caste criterion.⁷ For the first time since 1951, a court intervened

to strike down a scheme for backward classes in a decision widely acclaimed as a blow at casteism. Revulsion from communal criteria was reinforced by reports of their abuse. In a situation where many thoughtful persons were increasingly concerned about the dangerous potentialities of social cleavages, the alleged divisive tendencies of the communal criterion seemed a serious threat to national unity and integration.

While a 'casteless and classless society' remained the avowed aim of the Congress and a wide section of the intelligentsia, there had been a subtle shift in notions of how this aim was to be pursued. A decade before it was widely thought that special redistributive measures were required specifically to offset inequalities associated with caste, even while general development programmes addressed other aspects of inequality. The notion of caste differentials as themselves a significant form of inequality deserving of special governmental attention to eliminate their effects gave way to a notion that the salient differences were economic; specific redistributive measures directed at caste differences were not necessary, since overall development would raise the general level. Recognition of caste differences in order to offset their effects was replaced by an enhanced reluctance to recognise them at all; indeed, any recognition of such differences was seen as itself a violation of egalitarian principles and productive of inequality.

In May 1961, the Cabinet decided that no national list of OBCs should be drawn up and the states were informed that in the view of the Government of India 'it was better to apply economic tests than to go by caste'. At the end of May a Conference of Chief Ministers to consider matters relating to National Integration 'agreed that economic backwardness rather than community or caste would provide an appropriate criterion for giving aid to individuals in matters of education including professional

and technical training'. In August 1961, the Home Ministry informed the state governments of the Centre's decision not to list backward classes. In the Ministry's view, the very expansiveness of such proposed enumerations as that of the Backward Classes Commission militated against them: '... if the bulk of the country's millions were to be regarded as coming within the category of Backward Classes, no useful purpose could be served by separate enumerations of such classes'. Furthermore the caste criterion was objectionable: '... the remedies suggested on the basis of caste would be worse than the evil of backwardness itself'. But subsequent efforts to discover usable criteria on economic lines 'did not yield any useful results'. Where in 1956, the Home Ministry had acknowledged an obligation to compile a list in accordance with the requirements of Article 340, it now pointed out that the Constitution did not require the Centre to draw up a list. Since even if it were to do so, 'it will still be open to every state government to draw up its own lists [and] any all-India list would have no practical utility'. More importantly, the 'crying need' of the day was social cohesion and emotional integration. There was the grave danger that different treatment of the 'backward' would foster divisive tendencies, and would undermine efforts for general economic uplift and the reduction of disparities between different classes. The states were urged to emphasise the expansion of welfare and educational benefits to all of the poor, employing economic rather than communal categories.[...]

With the abandonment of central attempts to define the backward classes and the relinquishment of whatever control might accompany central funds for OBCs the matter reverted to the states. The composition of the OBCs, the scope of preferential programmes and the level of benefits continued to vary widely from state to state.[...]

It is worth noting a few of the salient features of this profile [across the states of the Indian union]. Caste and

communal units remain the predominant 'classes' that are deemed backward. Caste lists range in magnitude from those which include a substantial portion of the state's population to those comprising a narrow stratum just above the Untouchables. Income tests are also employed in many cases, sometimes independently and sometimes in conjunction with communal units. The level of benefits ranges from none through scholarships and fee concessions to an array of reservations in government posts and medical college admissions.

There is important regional variation. For convenience we may think of three contiguous groupings. First, there is what we might call the peninsular bloc comprising the four Dravidian states (Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu) and Maharashtra. In these states the backward classes categories have a long history descending from pre-Independence arrangements; there are a wide range of benefits, (except in Maharashtra) a major segment of the population—from 38 to 55 per cent—is included and a major segment of scarce opportunities are reserved for them.

In stark contrast is what we might call the eastern-middle band, stretching across India from Assam in the north-east through West Bengal and Orissa, across Madhya Pradesh to Rajasthan and Gujarat. In these states there is no significant use of the OBCs category.

The northern tier of states displays an intermediate pattern. Jammu and Kashmir, with its history of communal quotas, resembles the southern pattern. An admixture of geographical criteria is found there and in Punjab and Uttar Pradesh (UP), along with use of communal units. Bihar, like Jammu and Kashmir, approximates the peninsular pattern. The backward classes are selected on a communal basis and make up a sizeable portion of the population, but the benefits have not been as extensive as

the south. Extension of benefits to reservations of government posts in 1978 set off a political crisis.

What the Central government tried in 1965 to portray as a trend towards substitution of economic for communal criteria was even then largely a rhetorical artefact, albeit one built around two substantial items—the abandonment of communal units in Andhra and in Mysore. From the vantage point of the late 1970s this ‘trend’ appears more as a transient deflection from the main line of development of backward classes lists. That line of development has been one of continuing use of communal units but with increasing refinement and restraint. Under pressure from the courts, almost all the state governments that made extensive use of the backward classes category set up commissions to identify the backward classes.[...]

All of these commissions, and the government orders based on their recommendations, use communal units to designate the backward classes. But Jammu and Kashmir relies heavily on occupational and territorial groups and Kerala employs an income cutoff. The selection of communities is more sophisticated: the commissions attempt to assemble (and sometimes generate) evidence about occupation, income and education as well as status and disabilities. Most of them strive to eliminate the well-off. In some cases, the number of groups designated is more modest than earlier. Benefits are recommended for a limited span of time and there is concern about termination and reassessment.[...]

What emerges from the interaction of state governments, commissions and courts are lists of communal groups, with some admixture of geographic and income factors, chosen on the basis of low status, low educational attainments and poverty. We might generalise very tentatively about the magnitude of the backward classes category: the lists tend to converge on something like the second and third lowest quintiles of the population (assuming the SCs and STs make

up roughly the lowest quintile). Northern and southern states arrive at this position from very different starting points. In the peninsula (and in Jammu and Kashmir), the Commission process represents a pruning away of the more prosperous and powerful groups from a comprehensive list that approximated a regime of communal quotas. In the northern tier, however, provision for this stratum is added slowly, first in education, then in government jobs, converging on a somewhat similar position.

Through the course of this development the term 'Backward Classes' has retained a multiplicity of meanings. It is used to describe the totality of groups entitled to preferential treatment on the basis of their 'backwardness', i.e. the SCs and STs as well as 'Other Backward Classes'—but *not* those accorded special treatment because of temporary or situational disadvantage (e.g., disaster victims, refugees, defence personnel). The term also refers specifically to those backward groups *other than* the SCs and STs. There remain fundamental, if rarely articulated, disagreements about who these groups are. Some would confine this category to the lowly—those 'far below' the mean in welfare and resources, or those whose deprivations are comparable to those of the SCs and STs; others use the term backward classes to describe a wide middle stratum of Indian society, who require and deserve special help because they are lagging behind the most advanced groups. There is, as we have seen, further disagreement over whether the term refers to the less well-off in all communities or whether it encompasses only those communities that suffer 'backwardness' as a group.

The question of who were the SCs was debated and roughly settled before Independence within the executive and without the participation of the courts. But who are the backward classes is a post-Independence question which the constitutional recognition of the category made one of all-India scope. The Constitution left the matter with the

executive at the state level with an option for the Centre to unify it. When the executive at the Centre first failed and then declined to provide a resolution, the question reverted to the states. In the wake of the Janata victory in the 1977 elections, the backward classes returned to the national political agenda. Pursuant to its electoral promise, the Janata government appeared poised to appoint a new Backward Classes Commission, but had not done so by mid-1978. The UP and Bihar governments under Janata control, enlarged substantially the preferences for OBCs, leading to massive violence in Bihar and political intervention by the Centre.

During the hiatus of Central involvement, what the states did was increasingly subjected to the examination of the courts. It has been the Supreme Court rather than the Central government which has been the unifying and limiting influence and presumably any new Central policy will be shaped in light of two decades of judicial predominance in this area.

JUSTICE FOR DALITS
AMONG DALITS*All the Ghosts Resurface**

K. BALAGOPAL

A notable feature of Indian society in recent years is that from out of disadvantaged people who are dealt with by the law as well as in the idiom of social justice as homogeneous classes (Dalits, minorities, women, etc.), categories asserting their further discrimination have emerged, seeking society's attention to their particular plight. The situation calls for a sensitive response that will neither deny them further discrimination nor use it as a stick to beat the parent category with.

The Madiga campaign for subdivision of the Scheduled Caste (SC) reservation in Andhra Pradesh is a very prominent instance. Asserting that within the SCs there is a local hierarchy of social status, worth, value (and even touchability), and also that the SC reservation is being taken disproportionately by two of them, namely the Adi Andhras and Malas, the madigas ran a successful campaign to persuade the state government to make a four-fold subdivision of the SCs in the state, and apportion the reservation to the four subgroups in such a manner that all may in fact get a more equitable share. Almost nobody other than a section of the relatively better placed SCs has denied the fact of further discrimination within the Dalit communities, and all political parties have supported the campaign. But it has foundered on the law as understood by the courts. The conclusive (for the present) view of a Constitution bench of five judges of the Supreme Court is

that it is constitutionally impermissible to do what the madigas wanted. Why and how the court said so we shall see below. But as a general caveat it must be said that whatever may be the defects of our Constitution, and there are many, anyone who knows that document would view with scepticism any assertion of a disjoint between its prescriptions and any aspiration for social or political justice and the social or political impediments in giving effect to constitutional possibilities. The only exception to this would be the aspiration for self-determination of unwilling components of what would be the Indian nation, which is irrefutably unconstitutional, as the Constitution now stands.

ANDHRA PRADESH ORDER

Persuaded by the vigorous campaign launched by the madigas, the government of Andhra Pradesh initially issued an order which was struck down by a full bench of the high court, principally on the ground that the government had not consulted the National Commission for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, but also on more doubtful grounds. Later, after completing that consultation, the government passed an Act (Act 20 of 2000) to the same effect. As before, this was challenged by persons of the mala and adi andhra communities, but a five-judge bench of the high court, by a majority of four to one, upheld the Act, overruling the other objections the previous bench had expressed. Against that the petitioners appealed to the Supreme Court, for which leave was granted by the high court, and in the apex court they have succeeded. A five-judge bench of the Supreme Court, in *E. V. Chinnaiah vs State of AP*, has unanimously held the Act to be unconstitutional, in a judgment that is poor in logic and poorer in judicial wisdom.

The Supreme Court says two things: (1) Apportionment of the reservations made to SCs or STs to subgroups within cannot be done by the state legislatures. Only Parliament has the competence to do so. (2) But even Parliament does not have the competence to do so since the Constitution has intended that the SCs and STs are an indivisible, homogeneous entity. Maybe in fact they are not, but for all constitutional purposes they are.

Both the contentions are demonstrably ill-founded. But until at least a bench of seven judges of the Supreme Court says so, or the Constitution is amended to clarify that it has been saddled with what the makers of the document never intended, all aspirations for inter se justice within the Dalit and Adivasi groups—aspirations which are only now finding voice—will have to stay mute, constitutionally speaking. In fact, the Supreme Court has gone to the extent of saying that it is not permissible to even appoint a commission of enquiry to identify the more backward among the SCs.

Three separate but concurring judgments have been written by the five-judge bench, none of them more edifying than the others: N. Santosh Hegde for himself, S. N. Variava and B. P. Singh; H. K. Sema for himself; and S. B. Sinha for himself. It is something of a strain to unravel the thread of the reasoning adopted by them, not because it is profound, but because lack of logical clarity and connectedness has become a very common characteristic of judicial pronouncements even at the highest level these days and this judgment is a classic instance. The constitutional position concerning the SC and ST lists (there is a separate list for each state) is clear. Article 341 says:

1. The president may with respect to any State or Union Territory (UT), and where it is a State, in consultation with the governor thereof, by public notification, specify the castes, races, or tribes, or

parts of or groups within castes, races or tribes which shall for the purposes of this Constitution be deemed to be SCs in relation to that State or Union Territory, as the case may be.

2. Parliament may by law include or exclude from the list of SCs specified in a notification issued under clause (1) any caste, race or tribe or part of or group within any caste, race or tribe, but save as aforesaid a notification issued under the said clause shall not be varied by any subsequent notification.

Article 342 is a similar provision for STs.

Thus, the president initially declares the list of SCs in consultation with the governors of the respective states, and any inclusion or exclusion thereafter is done by an Act of Parliament. Except by an Act of Parliament the SC or ST list cannot be modified to include or exclude a caste. Every other authority including the state and Central governments is bound by these lists so declared and amended.

DISCRETION OF AUTHORITIES

But subject to acceptance of these lists as they stand, the giving of reservations or the making of any other special provisions is a wide discretion available to the authorities at all levels. This discretion contrasts sharply with the very clear reservation of the power to declare a community to be SC or ST, to the President initially and Parliament thereafter. The courts have repeatedly held that it requires no Act of any legislature to give reservations or special provisions. Every instrumentality of the state and every local body is free to do so in the course of the exercise of its administrative authority, within the usual limits of fairness and reasonableness that apply to all governmental action.

Why should not this discretion include also the power to divide the special provisions it makes among the beneficiaries in such a way that it is more equitably accessed by them? No caste is added to or deleted from the SC/ST list thereby. The lists remain intact. If not every authority, the state executive and legislature certainly have this power since they have the power to administer and legislate in connection with education, employment and social welfare.

The Supreme Court says no, because the constitutional provision that only Parliament can add to or delete from the SC/ST lists means much more than what it says. It means (in the words of Santosh Hegde) that any action that 'interferes, disturbs, rearranges, regroups or reclassifies the various castes in the list' unless it is an Act of Parliament is barred by the Constitution. How does the court read so much into the plain language of Article 341? The Supreme Court is no Humpty-Dumpty to make words mean what it wants them to mean. It must obey and follow the meaning of the expressions themselves. Where the expressions are plain it has no discretion to add or subtract anything. It is only where the expressions are obscure or otherwise of doubtful meanings that the court steps in, not to give them the meaning it wishes but to elicit what the lawmakers may have meant. There is nothing whatsoever obscure or doubtful about Article 341.

It is true that legal theory holds that interpretation of the Constitution is different from interpretation of ordinary law, and that the Constitution must be interpreted liberally, broadly, and in a manner suitable for the changing times and social needs. This is not the place to go into a discussion of that seemingly attractive proposition, though one is entitled to be suspicious of the sudden eruption of respect for changing times in usually conservative circles ever since the rise of neo-liberalism. But whatever that

proposition means it cannot mean that the Supreme Court will rewrite the Constitution.

Briefly it may be said that words used in the Constitution which are in the nature of *concepts* or *generalities* can be and must be given meaning keeping changed circumstances, hopes and aspirations in view. The wide meaning sought to be given by the courts to the abstract noun 'life' in Article 21 is an instance. But, plain words which lay down who can do what and how, cannot be given any other than literal interpretation, since we do not want that judges rewrite the Constitution to suit their views and values. One major criticism of the only Constituent Assembly we ever had is that it was not elected on universal adult suffrage. We do not want to have an unelected second one now. In any case, if changing times is the touchstone for reading constitutional provisions differently than what they seem to plainly say, then the most relevant change in this context is the rising aspirations of the disadvantaged within the disadvantaged, and not the opposition of the more advantageously placed among them to the nascent grievance of those below.

AMBEDKAR'S OBSERVATIONS

In support of the wide meaning that Santosh Hegde has chosen to give Article 341, he quotes an observation of Ambedkar's in the Constituent Assembly debates. When a question was raised as to why the President, who declares the list of SCs and STs, should not be given the power to add or delete communities from the list, and why that power should be given to Parliament, Ambedkar is supposed to have said that it was to 'eliminate any kind of political factors having a play in the matter of the disturbance in the Schedule so published by the President'. That Ambedkar used the expression 'disturbance' in this context is relied upon to draw the far-fetched inference

that any disturbance, and not merely addition or deletion of a community, is included in the meaning of 'include or exclude' in Article 341(2).

Ambedkar was talking of something else. He evidently apprehended that the President may act as an instrument of the party in power in adding or deleting communities from the SC/ST list, whereas even if the party in power has a majority in Parliament, the very process of law-making with its debate and discussion would act as a check on mala fide politics. It is this problem that he was addressing and not the issue whether adding or deleting communities from the lists includes any and every 'disturbance'. A word used by a speaker can be given meaning in relation to an issue only if that issue was present in the mind of the speaker when the word was used. The Supreme Court has in recent times laid down the proposition that it is permissible to look into the Constituent Assembly debates to understand the meaning of provisions of the Constitution. That certainly does not mean that the sense of a word in relation to one context can be deducted from the use of the word in a different context in the debates.

The other and more portentous view of the Supreme Court is that SC is a single class, a homogeneous expression, and therefore no further subgrouping within the SCs is permissible. The way the reasoning in support of this view is elaborated, the view would apply also to the STs. And it would also negate the power conceded to Parliament in the first limb of the court's decision to make a classification of the SCs. It would make the regrouping unconstitutional, whether done by the state legislature or by Parliament. S. B. Sinha's concurring and lengthy judgment is entirely devoted to making this point, but one may read it backward and forward a dozen times and still not find any reason in it. He cites provisions of the Constitution where the STs of what we would today call the north-east are treated separately from the STs of the rest of the country, and adds

that this shows that where the Constitution wanted to make a sub-classification of the SCs or STs it has itself done so, and therefore where it has chosen not to do so, such classification is impermissible. All that it in fact proves is that inequality within the SCs or STs in general was not a given for the Constitution-makers the way the peculiar history of the tribal areas of what was in those days known as Assam. Nothing more can reasonably be concluded from this, unless one intends to stultify the Constitution, which is exactly what is sought to be provided against when legal theory says that the interpretation of constitutional law proceeds on a somewhat different footing than the interpretation of ordinary law.

It is important that neither S. B. Sinha nor any of the other judges has expressed doubt about the state government's stand that there is inequality within the SCs and that the reservations provided for the SCs are being preponderantly taken by a few of the 59 SCs. It is better to hear this in S. B. Sinha's own language:

It may not be necessary for us to delve deep into the question as to whether the factual foundation for enacting the said legislation being based on a report of a Court of Enquiry constituted under Section 3 of the Commissions of Enquiry Act, 1952 known as Justice Raju Report is otherwise laudable or not.

The question then is reduced to a pure question of law: whether it is permissible to identify subgroups of the SCs which have benefited little from reservations and allot their quota separately to them, leaving the residue as the quota of those who have benefited disproportionately. No, says the Supreme Court.[...]

[T]his is a position that tends against reservation itself. Indeed, as I will argue at the end, this judgment is in truth

a view against reservations as such, though apparently only about the impermissibility of subdividing SC reservations. That the victorious sections of the Dalits are unable to see this point is a tragedy by itself. It has always been the argument of the upper castes in opposing reservations that it discourages merit and the endeavour to excel. The courts have for decades resisted this argument with cogent reasons. Is it permissible to use this argument now in to oppose subdivision of reservations?

As for the Constitution treating the members of the SCs as 'a single integrated class of most backward citizens', that is what needs to be demonstrated, not proclaimed. Where does the Constitution say so? In the judgment written by Santosh Hegde too, one finds this syllogistic conundrum: SCs are the backward-most in society. If you say that some of them are more backward than the others, then that means that the less backward among them can no longer be among the most backward in society, because there are some who are more backward than them. Ergo, the SCs cannot be divided into the more and the less backward, since by definition they are all the backward-most.

SYLLOGISTIC CONUNDRUM

Nowhere does the Constitution say that the SCs are the backward-most in society, which is the proposition with which this syllogism starts. The Constitution does not define SCs in social terms at all. SCs are those who find themselves in the SC list, as declared by the President and amended from time to time by Parliament. If a social indicator of what would constitute SC is needed, one can look into the debates in the Constituent Assembly, as the courts have frequently been doing to ascertain the meaning assigned to terms used in the Constitution. Or one can look at administrative practice in identifying the SCs. It will be found that SCs are none but the 'panchamas',

Untouchables, of Hindu society. Everybody knows this but in the reams and reams of judicial exposition on the matter, the courts have for some reason found it impossible to say so, though V. R. Krishna Iyer in his significant judgment in *State of Kerala vs N. M. Thomas*, 1976 consistently refers to SCs as 'harijans' (the word Dalit had not come into vogue then).

That the SCs are the backward-most is an evaluation of their social status, but in fact what defines them is untouchability. Indeed, in many states there are some communities listed in the OBC list who may well be socially more backward than the SCs, such as for instance the 'Dommaras' of Andhra Pradesh, but are not in the SC list because they are not Untouchables.

The description of SCs as backward-most (the most backward, the abysmally backward, etc.) is owed to the Supreme Court itself, and in a very different context. *State of Kerala vs N. M. Thomas*, 1976 is also a Constitution bench judgment scripted by seven judges, each of whom wrote his own judgment. A conscious attempt was made by them, especially by V. R. Krishna Iyer, to clear much of the confusion that had gathered around reservations, thanks to the inhibitions that clogged the conservative minds that have always ruled the courts. In the course of the attempt, V. R. Krishna Iyer used many expressions—inclined as he was to literary largesse—indicating the position and situation of the SCs: 'lowliest and the lost', 'utterly depressed', 'stark backwardness', 'bottom layer', 'most backward classes', 'sunken sections', are among those expressions. He carried on the exposition in *Akhil Bharatiya Soshit Karamchari Sangh (Rly) vs Union of India*, 1981, where he said even more plainly that the SCs are 'not merely backward but the backward-most'. This rhetorical device used as an expository technique to emphasise the justification for special provisions, seems later to have become definitive of SCs, and has now been used to beat

the more disadvantaged of them with. But the same judge, in *State of Kerala vs N. M. Thomas*, regularly used the word 'harijan' to describe the SCs, which could equally have been taken as definitive of that category, which would have been closer to the intention of the makers of the Constitution and administrative practice. And then the syllogism that prohibits sub-grouping and apportionment of the SC quota would no longer operate. It is found that some Untouchables are untouchable for other Untouchables, then why should they not be classified separately within the list of Untouchables, what would be unreasonable about it?

The alternative contention that the SCs constitute a 'homogeneous class', a 'single integrated class', a 'single class by themselves', and therefore cannot be grouped is even less tenable.[...]

The giving of reservation is said to be not a constitutional mandate but a discretionary prerogative of the state. But once it is exercised in relation to a class recognised by the Constitution, the prerogative is lost, the discretion is gone, insofar as it concerns subdividing the allotted reservation among groups within the class. But why? The Constitution recognises the class, viz, the SCs, in the sense that it is conscious that there are certain very specially placed peoples in our society who need to be endowed with special rights, shown special concern by the administration, etc. The list of those peoples is left to be declared by the President and amended from time to time by Parliament. The measures to be taken for their advancement or protection is the prerogative of the state. It is the discretion of the state to adopt such special measures as it would like to realise the intention of the Constitution-makers in the matter. Where does the Constitution warrant putting a full stop to this prerogative after the state has made provision for the class as a whole, so long as the state does not add or delete castes from the list? Where is the state barred from looking at who is taking what is given for

the class as a whole, and doing something reasonable to set that right? [...]

ARGUMENT AGAINST EQUITY

It is trite indeed that justice must be equitable. But the rider that ‘justice to one group at the cost of injustice to another group is another way of perpetrating injustice’, without any reference to the unequal position of the two groups, which fact is nowhere disbelieved by the judge, is not an argument for but against equity. And it is an argument against reservations as such, and not just their categorisation, for ‘justice to some at the cost of injustice to the others’ has ever been the rallying cry of anti-reservationists. And if one is to talk of discrimination in reverse, it is the court’s injunction against classifying the lesser among the Dalits separately for the purpose of allotting their quota to them that deserves the appellation. For have the same courts not held again and again that not making a classification when it cries out to be made amounts to treating unequals as equals, which would truly ‘earn the wrath of Article 14’? It is strange that the judge thinks it is the making of such a classification—whose factual basis, I must reiterate yet once more, is not in dispute—attracts such wrath.[...]

‘HOMOGENEOUS’ CLASS?

We may finally look at what the Constitution itself says in definition of the SCs, and how ‘homogeneous’ the class is in the view of the Constitution. Article 341 has been cited above. It speaks of ‘castes, races, tribes or parts of or groups within castes, races and tribes’ which the President in consultation with each state governor notifies, and which shall there-upon for the purpose of the Constitution be deemed to be SCs. Castes, races, tribes or parts of or groups within castes, races and tribes is certainly not a

very homogeneous thing? The only thing that makes it homogeneous is that all of them are Untouchables. What would be surprising if some of the castes, races, tribes or parts or groups thereof are in a position to take the full benefit of what is given collectively to all of them? And if that happens, why should it be assumed that the Constitution, which has revealed the awareness that untouchability has diverse social origins, prohibits subdivision of the reservation so that all may get some benefit.

In answer, apart from the pronouncements of homogeneity that abound in the three separate and concurring judgments, a precedent is offered by Santosh Hegde, by misreading Murtaza Fazal Ali and misquoting V. R. Krishna Iyer, both from *State of Kerala vs N. M. Thomas*, 1976. That judgment was the first time a broad view befitting the better aspect of the Constitution was taken by the majority of a Constitution bench in the matter of reservations. The judges found themselves answering the objection that since Article 16(2) prohibits discrimination on the ground only of religion, race, caste, sex, descent, place of birth or residence, the 'backward class' of persons to whom reservations in government services can be given by virtue of Article 16(4) cannot be a caste or castes, it can only be a class.

Today, it is a commonplace that if a caste, say the caste of toddy tappers, is identified as a backward class for the purpose of Article 16(4), then it does not amount to giving reservations to a caste. It only means that toddy tappers have been found to be a backward class by virtue of some rational criteria of backwardness, and are given reservations as such. A caste after all is a class in the common sense meaning that it is a clearly defined group that is for all practical purposes well demarcated from the rest of society. If it is found to be backward according to some objective and rational criteria, then it can be the

recipient of reservations or other special provisions, without facing the objection that there is discrimination in favour of a caste. It took time for the courts to arrive at this formulation, which accounts for the tortured language employed by the courts in the process.[...]

It is absurd to claim that V. R. Krishna Iyer or anybody for that matter could have held that there are no castes, tribes, groups, etc. within Hinduism. It merely serves the purpose of drawing the conclusion that from out of the 'amalgam' (of what?) called Hinduism the President has picked out the lowliest who are in need of massive state assistance and made out of them the class called SCs, which is therefore an undifferentiated, indivisible class. Judicial reasoning could have sunk no lower.[...]

It is intriguing the way the judge draws the conclusion of indivisibility from the mere fact that a group of persons constitute class in themselves. No such conclusion automatically follows. Logical pathologies apart, to be a class a group merely needs to be well defined and clearly demarcated from others. Whether it is thereafter legitimately further classifiable into subgroups does not follow one way or the other from this circumstance.[...]

... Anyway, acknowledging that this problem is real, S. B. Sinha says that a quota within reservation is not the solution. Instead, give them 'scholarships, hostel facilities, special coaching, etc.', he says. This is the fourth time we find a line of reasoning in the judgment that is against reservations as such and not merely a quota within reservations. It has always been the argument of upper-caste anti-reservationists that the government may provide the backward classes with scholarships, hostel facilities, free books, etc. but please do not cut into our monopoly in colleges and offices.

AGAINST RESERVATIONS

At the end what we have is a judgment purportedly against subdivision of the SC reservation quota, but which is in fact replete with arguments against reservations as such. A little more than a decade ago, in the Mandal Commission case (*Indira Sawhney vs Union of India*, 1992) nine judges of the Supreme Court went into the whole gamut of the reservations question and answered all the issues, affirming some earlier judgments, overruling some, and laying down the law in quite a satisfactory manner. It was hoped that most of the ghosts that have haunted the provision of reservations/special provisions for the oppressed castes of Hindu society had been laid to rest.

Apparently not. But then, what more do you expect when a section of the Dalits themselves go to court against those below them, and employ all the arguments the Brahmins invented against reservations and special provisions for the deprived castes as such? Did they not ask for it? Did they not lay it open to the court to once again happily walk over what in law would be called 'covered ground'? Everyone in Andhra Pradesh recalls the glee with which casteist society welcomed the arguments used by the malas against the demand raised by the madigas. There is in general in human affairs nothing more calculated to please than the appropriation of your arguments by your own opponent in the innocent assumption that he is protecting the right obtained against you from an encroacher. And like society, like judges, for the tortuous reluctance with which the courts came to accept that India is a caste society and something should be done about it if we are ever to be a real democracy is evident from the history of judicial pronouncements on reservations.

To the judges, one is tempted to read what a predecessor of theirs said two decades ago. In *K. C. Vasanth Kumar vs State of Mysore*, 1985, O. Chinnappa Reddy said something about how the Constitution of India, at least in its more positive aspect, may be read:

...We must also remember that we are expounding a Constitution born...of an anti-imperialist struggle, influenced by constitutional instruments, events and revolutions elsewhere, in search of a better world, and wedded to the idea of justice, economic, social and political to all. Such a Constitution must be given a generous interpretation so as to give all its citizens the full measure of the justice promised by it.

This probably sounds terribly like twentieth-century discourse, but it was twentieth-century aspirations that shaped the Republic of India, and there is no cogent reason for declaring that Republic dead.

RESERVATIONS AND THE RETURN TO POLITICS*

SUSIE THARU, M. MADHAVA PRASAD,
REKHA PAPPU AND K. SATYANARAYANA

Our essay was born out of a shared perception that the debate on reservations in particular and of caste in general could benefit from a reprise and re-evaluation of the political dimension of the question. The term political has other meanings which we will be invoking in what follows, but here we mean in particular those aspects that have a bearing on the formal, structural problems posed by the installation of a republic in a society divided by caste. By critically examining the prevailing range of opinions on this issue we want to broaden the scope of the debate beyond reservations to the more pervasive and complex problem of caste as such and in the process contribute to a re-grounding of the struggle against caste discrimination away from the confines of state policy into which it is repeatedly decoyed. We believe that this return to politics is mandated by the way in which recent developments have de-stabilised the assumption of an accomplished social contract and a democratic polity.

Our inquiry will draw sustenance from a reading of the ongoing struggle over reservations, although this essay is by no means an exhaustive commentary on this chain of events that has come to be known as Mandal II. Thus one of the issues that we need to address is how the 'defence of privilege' in the current context is able to employ with impunity the language of universality. What are the origins of this naturalised equation of the register of democracy

with the institutionalised dominance of a minority? How have the principles of universality been systematically re-signified to suit the objective interests and historical capacities of the dominant caste/class formation?

In keeping with the spirit of constitutional provisions, the Indian state has, in its own domain, instituted over the years a number of measures to produce a representative community: the bureaucracy and the public sector enterprises today show the results of such intervention to a substantial if not a satisfactory extent. On the other hand the state has failed miserably in its self-ascribed role as the agent of a proactive programme of re-constituting the body politic in keeping with the modern democratic ideals inscribed into the Constitution.

When it comes to tackling the social problem of caste discrimination and structural inequalities, the state has no doubt produced a number of legal provisions, but has refrained from undertaking the work of restructuring, of reforming its citizen-subjects in keeping with the commitment to end caste discrimination and oppression. On the contrary, it would appear covertly to have firmed up and strengthened the normative, upper caste and Hindu formation of this subjectivity.

Publicly caste has been subject to a policy of disavowal, rather than of direct action. In such a situation, reservations have become an important battleground for staging democratic conflicts, in spite of their relatively minor significance in transforming the subcontinent's caste-based social order. In other words, even if reservations have had or are capable of having little overall impact on the condition of the beneficiary groups, its importance as a site of political conflict cannot be overlooked.

In a social order where civil society has insulated itself against incursions from political society to the extent of appearing to be a nation within the nation, it is not

surprising that reservations—a provision that responds, in its own small way, to the fact of discrimination—have become the battleground where unresolved questions about India's political identity are being raised again. We must see the battle over reservations as only the most visible site of contestation and re-negotiation of the political covenant, behind which lie a whole host of localised, inchoate, mutually contradictory struggles imbued with confidence and energy and optimism in the face of despair, struggles that are reshaping the Indian polity at the base in ways that we are yet to come to grips with.

BEYOND POLICY

The debates that erupted in the wake of the so-called Mandal II can be the starting point for a critical engagement with the prevailing discourse. The special supplement of the *Economic and Political Weekly* on this issue (41: 24, June 17-23, 2006) provides a representative sample of the prevailing opinion. What is immediately evident in this collection is that with one exception (Kancha Ilaiah), the contributions do not treat reservations as a political question. The primary orientation of the debate is towards policy, and the discourse is strewn with terms like costs, benefits, efficiency, and with demands for more accurate information about population segments, and a multiplicity of other factors that affect access to opportunities, etc. They remain within an academic-bureaucratic framework where the question of the right policy measures is already assumed to be the shared ground on which to stage the debate. They have differences about what policies should be adopted, but rarely do they question the assumption that what we have here is basically a question of policy.

It is significant that the 'political' moment in which government policy is being addressed and proposals made, is that of the anti-reservation protests. Consequently, the only subjective interests that make an appearance in the discussion are those of the anti-reservationists. It is their sentiments that are acknowledged, and their political challenge that is read as grievance that needs accommodation and redressal in the policy recommendations. The rest are assumed to be passively available for slotting into various objectively-defined categories of relative deprivation and eligibility for measures of positive discrimination. Thus, an entire range of contributions is marked by one shared presupposition: that there exists a coherent and hegemonic political subject who is interested simultaneously in maintaining the standards of merit and excellence naturally assumed to be of primary interest to a majority, and rendering social justice to the rest (assumed to be a 'minority') through policies of positive discrimination.

In keeping with this strict policy orientation, these arguments rarely pause to question the categories such as majority and minority that are fundamental to the very possibility of such an orientation. While some have noted that the 'general category' itself functions as reservation for the upper castes (Ghosh in the same issue of *EPW*), the political significance of the fact that this 'majority' which is fabricated by negation and represented symbolically by the 50 per cent limit on reservations, is an artificial majority without demographic or political foundation, is rarely discussed. In such a context, merely suggesting policy reform with the no doubt laudable aim of defusing potential social conflicts, may also end up ignoring or burying under the carpet real political challenges to the prevailing order with potentially far-reaching and genuinely democratic consequences.

Discrimination and Deprivation

Many of the contributions to the recent debate do take up political dimensions of the situation by highlighting instances of discrimination based upon caste prejudices (S. Deshpande, A. Deshpande, J. Ghosh and Thorat in the *EPW* special issue). This is a valuable contribution which demonstrates the reality of discrimination and marginalisation with the aid of statistical data and recourse to established criteria of backwardness and deprivation, such as region, gender, caste, etc. in combination. But this analysis is usually aborted and re-directed towards policy by defining its goal as that of 'demonstrating' that something is the case. But demonstrate to whom? Who is to be convinced of the need for reservations and what are the terms of that demand? Since the state has already declared that the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) reservations will be introduced in educational institutions, it would appear that only the opponents of reservation are in need of being so convinced. Thus, in a peculiar twist, policy recommendations seem to be addressed, not to the state, which seems to be already responding to these realities, but to the phantom majority whom the self-styled 'Youth for Equality' and others claim to represent. Or, to put it differently, even though there is ample evidence that the state's character has undergone significant change since the foundation of the republic, it is still addressed in its early, essentially managerial form: the one that is meant when people speak of the 'idea of India'. Invariably, we note that the evidence of discrimination is usually channelled into an argument about deprivation: social divisions with structural consequences are translated into the language of a common measure of access to public goods, thus in a way disorienting the political analysis.

The shift from discrimination—which points to social divisions with structural consequences—to deprivation—a

lack that may be compensated—is symptomatic of the policy approach. The policy approach does not examine social divisions or inquire into the consequences for an understanding of the Indian society/democracy. It attempts to find a solution to a crisis. The fundamental question is: how do the state and its advisors perceive the crisis generated by the struggle for reservations, and, by contrast, how might it be perceived from the point of view of a democracy to come?

One way of shifting the discussion about reservations away from its present impasse in a more productive direction is to always insist on a consideration of its other, electoral dimension—the reserved constituencies in Parliament—along with jobs and educational opportunities. This will make it abundantly clear that it is a representational mechanism, a way of making sure that at least in the domain of public employment, there is representation for the Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribe (SC-ST) populations. To ensure such representation is to preserve the idea of a society providing equal opportunity for all communities. Ignoring this leads to the misperception that through reservations, the beneficiary communities will be dissolved into the general population, of which the ‘general category’ is the objective correlative. But in doing so, one fails to appreciate the truth behind these phenomena: that there is no general population, that the general category is not a reflection of it but a substitute that conceals its absence.

Reservations are a means by which the state, governing a polity divided into many communities, tries, instead of dissolving the communities into one, to construct a supplementary community by representation which will mediate the relations between the many communities that actually exist and the projected community that will unite all into one.

Before and After Independence

To gain a better understanding of this problem we need to look at both the differences and similarities between the logic of reservations in independent India and of those which British India and the princely states had introduced well before Independence, in response to the demands coming from various communities for adequate opportunities for their educated members in the institutions of colonial governance. The governments were under pressure to be more just (in their perception) in the distribution of public resources. Most communities thus spoke for themselves or spoke together in small groups. There it was quite openly a question of economic benefits, the communities were not asking for anything else, whereas in free India, the idea was to build a modern society, a new community with a completely overhauled political morphology. We should take note of two different logics that function behind the 'solution' that reservations constitute. In the first instance, in the colonial state's reckoning, reservations were an instrument of governance, a tool of pacification. British rule was not based on modern democratic principles. The British ruled over a congeries of communities rather than a people.

The free Indian state adopted parliamentary democracy thus opting for a decisive break with the pre-modern political structure of colonial rule. But for this it needed a people. There were several obstacles to the reconstitution or even for the re-imagining of this congeries of communities as a people. Of these obstacles, three are primary: Muslims, Dalits and the tribal populations of the north-east. Muslim recalcitrance was eventually resolved by Partition. Although a significant population of Muslims remained in free India, their bargaining powers were at least for the time being severely curtailed by the fact of Pakistan's emergence. There remained only the other two

sections, which were written into the Constitution as SCs and STs, thus continuing another colonial provision, in a move that clearly recognises the difficulty, if not impossibility, of assuming that they are part of the 'people'. Reservations for these sections thus served, in free India a completely different function: not of governance, but of achieving the ground-level requirements for founding a republic. This is discursively registered in the fact that after Independence the term communal, which in colonial discourse referred to relations among both castes and religious groups, has come to be used exclusively for religious groups: in return for reservations, the castes had to give up their claim to being communities. These are then the two logics of reservations in India: one, a tool of governance; two, a means of political self-constitution.

Time Frame

Another symptom which is instructive to examine is the question of the time-frame for reservations. Arguments repeatedly return to the question, 'how long is this to go on?' It is an interesting question, for which the usual answers are not adequate. To say that there should be a time limit or that there should not, is not as significant as discerning, behind this formulation, the choice of interpretations offered and then seeing which one we tend to adopt. Thus, the question can be elaborated in these two forms: The first, 'You have enjoyed reservations for x years. How much longer do you want to have this privilege? Is it not time for you to stand on your own feet and take your chances with the rest?' This is an interpretation based on seeing reservation as a special provision which the beneficiaries are supposed to use, wisely, to lift themselves out of their misery. The second interpretation is this: You have kept us chained to the system of reservations for x years. Till today you have done nothing to transform the society in such a way as to render reservations redundant.

How much longer are we to continue to depend on this meager provision as our only means to social betterment?

Means to an End

When we examine the debate, it is clear that while there are sharp differences over the question, it is primarily a difference over means, not ends. Nobody really denies that there is a need for measures to end caste oppression and discrimination, it is only on the question of how this is to be done and whether reservations are the best way, that the differences arise. In other words, there is, among all the positions represented in this debate, an overall agreement that reservations are a means to an end.

But are they really? How did we arrive at such an assumption? For instance when the government of the Madras Presidency, in response to a petition by the non-brahmin movement, offered them reservations, was the government regarding this extension as a means to an end? It is clear that while for the non-brahmins themselves it was such a means (for some of them at least, it led to better employment opportunities), the government was not pursuing any social justice project for which reservations might be conceived as a means. In making the provision, the purpose of reservations—re-distribution of public resources—would seem to have been already achieved. If the end is social justice, then reservations are more accurately defined as an interim measure, until the means are found and implemented to achieve that end.

A FOUNDATIONAL NECESSITY

Let us briefly return to the moment when the provision of reservations was inscribed in the Constitution. Reservations for SC/STs were a foundational necessity for the republic to come into being. In civil society discourse, this was usually, and still is, considered a full and final settlement of historical debt, after which caste would cease

to be a political issue. Caste violence and other evidence of continuing caste discrimination and oppression thus came to be seen as a social rather than a political problem. On the one hand the state maintained a pre-dominantly non-interventionist stance vis-a-vis communal relations (whether between religious groups or castes) reminiscent of the colonial stance; on the other, it managed to sustain for some time the illusion of a modern polity moving steadily towards completion of its democratic project. But the idea shared by the political class of the early decades and the intelligentsia, that they were authorised by a social contract, was not shared by a majority of the population.

In time the country witnessed the return of the unresolved question of separate electorates, or rather the unresolved political questions of which the separate electorates demand was a symptom, seemed to have found a new way of re-entering the political agenda. Caste groups began to mobilise with renewed energy, this time importantly, though not exclusively within the framework of the parliamentary democratic system. This politics named caste as a principal axis for the distribution of status, wealth and knowledge. Movements like the Dalit Panthers and the Dalit Sangarsh Samithi of the 1970s, and later the political parties such as Republican Party of India, Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), Samajwadi Party (SP), Democratic Party of India, Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) all call for a sharing of power, which they regard as having been on a caste basis. The idea of a 'bahujan samaj' is new, and posits those who have been excluded/expropriated as the actual majority. The success of these newly emerging movements and political parties showed that the assumption of a unified and homogeneous polity was ill-founded. There was no singular political subject. The task of forging such a new community remains a task for the future.

A Political Instrument

The history of reservations as a political instrument in independent India can be divided into two broad phases. In the first phase reservations are restricted to the SC/STs and the common sense perception that these are measures of social justice prevails without much contestation. The apparent consensus over SC/ST reservations is in part a result of the fact that until the 1990s, reservations were quite effectively undermined in most institutions, their political bite 'tamed' as it were. The positive (those few who seemed suitable for appointment) and negative (how reservations were openly evaded by institutions) means through which this was achieved is subject for a separate study. The second phase was precipitated by the widespread violence against dalits and the emergence of new groups into the political arena. In this phase reservations ceased to appear to be a mere instrument of state generosity, turning into an avenue of political struggle, and for the assertion of group interests. A population that was kept in check by the projects and schemes of an economy of needs now emerged into a subjective position of asserting interests.

The grip of secular-nationalist hegemony was loosened, among other things by the new discourse on reservations which challenged the upper-caste monopoly over the idea of the public good and of the goods of the state. In this phase, reservations cease to be a special provision for the most oppressed and marginalised and comes to be more widely employed as a means of bargaining in the political process. This marks the advent of new claims on power and an interest based politics that threw up a number of new political subjectivities as the general mode of politics in India, marking the erosion of the Congress-nationalist ideology which kept in place a whole range of illusions about India's exceptionalism: its unique spiritual inclinations, its distaste for material goods, its hoary joint

family tradition, its respect for community, its androgynous sexual identities, etc.

Thus reservations have moved from being an instrument of symbolic levelling pre-requisite for political constitution to an active site of struggle among a host of communities newly awakened to the relation between their self-interest and the electoral process and other procedures of the state. To some extent this may appear to reinstate the field of discrete communities that prevailed under colonial rule. No doubt the impression is well-founded. But such a return may be the only way in which the unresolved political questions of the republic-to-come may be resolved, it may well be a restaging of the state-of-the-ground at Independence in order to find a new way forward.

THE SUBJECT OF THE REPUBLIC

To move into the political domain is to acknowledge that caste is not a problem of dalits or OBCs alone, but a political question pertinent to the republic as a whole. It is a question of who the 'subject' of the Indian republic is. This subject cannot be assumed to have been already forged. Yet, policy-related approaches are characterised precisely by this assumption, that there is a modern democratic political subject, and that the beneficiaries of reservations are an aberrant minority who must be incorporated into this subject. Two issues follow: first, the Dalit and caste movements offer a critique of the assumed citizen of India by describing him as secular national and upper caste/class. Second, it is not a question of helping the Dalit to be rid of caste, as if the Dalit alone is stuck with it and the rest of us are free. The political approach imposes upon us this criterion of emancipation/revolution: the polity as a whole is in need of emancipation, not just a section of it. And until this task remains incomplete, the trappings of democracy can only contribute to the

perpetuation of a simulacrum, beneath which the old order persists and reproduces itself in new ways.

On the other hand, there are unmistakable signs that the Indian state's managerial programme of social change has unraveled, and that today, the democratic apparatus is the site of a complex struggle of group interests. Classical Marxist political theory treats Parliament as a battleground of class interests. And in adopting the parliamentary democratic model, India also opted for the accompanying normative discourse which saw the polity as united by political sovereignty (in the liberal view) and divided by class interests (the left view). It is important to note that there was no attempt to actually re-construct the polity in keeping with the declared political ideals of the battle for independence to fit into the new political furniture: it was simply assumed that the furniture would by itself remake the inhabitants. And where there was evidence to the contrary, civil society discourse, in slavish reliance upon borrowed abstractions, imposed a prohibition: caste was to be eliminated by not referring to it. It was the crudest of disavowals, bound to produce compensatory symptoms all over the place.

If we examine the parliamentary discourse of recent times we see that indeed it is a battleground, but the terms in the conflict are not classes as defined in the western theory of democracy, but castes and religious communities in addition to class tendencies. The advantage in adopting this analysis of the parliamentary discourse is that it eliminates the pathologisation that caste, religious identities, gender and sexuality issues have been subjected to by the normative theories of democracy and allows a host of forces engaged in the political dynamic to show forth.

ECONOMIC CRITERIA

It is well known that one of the primary axes of differences over the issue of reservations has to do with whether the criteria for qualifying for them should be social or economic or a combination of both. The idea of providing for reservations based on economic criteria is a curious one which has been endorsed by many people. There is no instance of positive discrimination anywhere in the world which is based on economic criteria, for the simple reason that a state which intervenes in the gap between rich and poor is usually a welfare state or a socialist state whose goals are different from the goals for which reservations are meant. The poor are not a marginalised community but an economic class. The politics of class struggle is different from the conflicts that arise when an entire community is involved. If the idea of reservations based on economic criteria has arisen in the Indian context, it is only because of the existence of reservations, an attempt to redirect its benefits according to a different logic. Otherwise, any proposal of reservations based on economic criteria would immediately reveal itself to be a most peculiar proposition. It would imply that the rich spoke to the poor across a barrier of community. Thus, while deprivation is, in India, an index of caste discrimination, the reverse cannot be claimed. One cannot address discrimination by addressing deprivation.

The logic of reservations is entirely different from that of economic welfare measures. The crux of the matter is a differentiation between quantitative or measurable and qualitative or historical/cultural factors. This can also be posed as a question of the 'one' and the many, or as already mentioned above, as a choice between a paradigm of deprivation and one of discrimination. Community is that elusive entity to which these determinations apply. Let us proceed to apply them. If there is one community, then within that community what would count as an indicator of social distress or disadvantage to be remedied would be

economic, i.e. that which can be brought under a common measure. If on the other hand, there are many communities, and their separate existence is taken as the starting point, then the application of a common measure is out of the question. A single community—such as a homogeneous national community—would take account of the distress of its own members and seek to redress it. It would not then be a matter of providing for reservations, but of acting to relieve distress with effective measures. If then, there are reservations in a nation-state, we can read this as a sign that there is no unified community that coincides with the national population.

Reservations are a way of providing for those whom the state would like to include among those who are governed by it, but whom the dominant community does not recognise as a part of itself. Mistrust is at the heart of it, there is no bridge of sympathy between the two communities. Where there is one community, the state is with the community, they exist in tandem. The state is the state of the community. But where there are many communities, the state is an arbiter between communities. While its overall character may be derived from a bond with the dominant community, it is not in a position to serve it alone, thanks to the compulsions of the political order, which exceed the bounds of this social bond. For the state, it is imperative that there be, however illusory, a community effect that incorporates all. Thus, the community that the state represents is necessarily larger than the 'nation' and composed of inorganic material, rather than the organically linked members of an ethnic or religious group. It is the attempt of the state to try and bring all communities under the sway of a common measure.

Thus, the discourse of backwardness bears witness to the state's will to integrate the communities: to be backward is to be related to the forward in a quantifiable and

remediable manner. Already in the discourse of backwardness, therefore, an economic criterion has been introduced. A dialectic of qualitative and quantitative criteria thus ensues: the purely quantitative is not a satisfactory response to the fact of qualitative/historical differences reinforced by the continued strength of community barriers. The people assert the importance of qualitative differences, the reality of many communities because objective circumstances—the experience of the visible and invisible barriers of caste—force it upon them. However, the state in its response, while acknowledging qualitative differences, tries to contain the assertion by giving it a minimal quantitative legibility. The state asserts the will of the as-yet-elusive ‘one’ of political community against the people’s insistence that in reality it is a terrain of the many.

Discrimination and Education

The neglect of the historical fact of discrimination also has its impact upon our very understanding of what education is all about. A job-oriented conception of the educational system has today become so naturalised that education for citizenship, which is one of the important ideological means for reconstituting the social order, has been all but forgotten. The average student from a middle-class family today typically moves from the embrace of the family directly into the embrace of the capitalist firm without any subjective reconstruction as citizen and member of a national community. This absence of subjective reform was all too evident in the discourse of the anti-reservation agitators: while they employed familiar universalist terms like ‘equality’, their meaning did not depend at all on a consideration of the community as a whole. It was not the equality of all citizens that the term designated, but an abstract equality that could be achieved without any reference to social realities, by simply preserving all the

illusions fostered by the 'general category'. This is nothing but abuse of the language of universalism and democracy.

Reservations are the means by which the illusion of a national majority was created, thus meeting one of the requirements for the claim to the status of a nation-state. Reservations are the padding with which the bent shoulders of the oppressed were dressed up in order to make them look like members of the liberal-humanist universal community of Man, to deceive the gaze of democracy. From the beginning it appears that there was no intention to address this particular malaise, except by prohibiting its mention. Thus if India exists as a modern nation-state today, it is thanks to the optical illusion that reservations helped to create of a national community where none existed.

As we said earlier, when the task of implementing the Indian revolution was entrusted to technocrats and managers at the outset, the idea was that the Indian polity, predominantly rural, illiterate, poor and locked into pre-modern social hierarchies was a passive human mass that would await its emancipation by the deployment of scientific knowledge and technology. As far as political-ideological conflicts were concerned, there seemed to be only one, a conflict between the capitalist and socialist paths to modernisation, which was a stand-off in which the vast majority of the people had neither the competence nor the inclination to take sides. Not much importance was given to the already existing divisions within the social as potential grounds for the emergence of political interests.

New Game of Interests

This is where the second phase of the politics of reservation comes to the fore. In this phase, it is no longer a question of extending the constitutional provisions to new groups in accordance with the same constitutive logic that prevailed in the first instance. Now it is a new game of interests.

Parliament, for the first time, began to be occupied by those who, in the earlier phase, were regarded as having no speaking parts in this drama of democracy; it became a battleground of a multitude of interests. These were not interests in the classical Marxist sense of class interests, which is probably why they have not been recognised as such by political commentators. Today, reservations serve more as a means for the expression of class/caste interests. If this is correct, it becomes all the more difficult to sustain the illusion of a neutral political subject who arbitrates claims for reservation. These claims, if they are such, are no longer addressed to anyone. They are translated into policy only through gaining and exercising political power. Hence the impression, real or illusory, that today Parliament stands on one side, responding to the message from the ground with pacificatory measures, while civil society (including its non-resident Indian wing), the judiciary and corporate capital are huddled together on the other side, backed by an increasingly strident media. As such, the current politics of reservations need not be assumed to be an unquestionably progressive development.

It is possible that there will be many difficulties and perhaps also some negative consequences arising out of these and other measures. But what is clear is that the process of which these are the results is a democratic process of the clarification, elaboration and consolidation of group interests, and at another plane, of the emergence of group interests as the ground of political struggle from out of the consensuality-effect produced by the post-Independence regime. It means that if there is to be a social contract at all, it will have to be negotiated anew, and that in this new round of negotiations, many more interests will be represented and will have the opportunity to voice their concerns than was conceivable in the first instance.

This is the reason why it is important that we understand the politics of this second phase, not as a politics of caste assertion, or even as an identity politics, but as a politics in which castes are asserting their right to power. This new politics demands a retooling of the normative subjectivity of formal democracy. It involves critical reformations of the institutions of public and private life, and requires altogether new frameworks for the accountability of the government to the people. There may be no quick or easy answers—but there is definitely a clear sense of a new challenge to established power, and new dreams that may only be glimpsed in the grain of the new struggles.

CENSUS IN COLONIAL INDIA AND THE BIRTH OF CASTE*

PADMANABH SAMARENDRA

The proposal of the Government of India to conduct a caste-census has generated intensely conflicting responses within and outside the Indian Parliament. Those in favour of the proposal argue that the survey would reveal the identity and numerical strength of the castes which suffer from deprivation; this in turn would help the state in re-formulating and extending policies, such as that of reservation, which would then ensure the uplift of the deprived sections. Those arguing against the enumeration of caste believe that the measure contravenes the ideals of citizenship and would foster divisive tendencies within society and the polity of the nation.

Notwithstanding the other differences, both the protagonists and antagonists in this debate stand together when sharing the following premises: they believe that caste is an indubitable reality of Indian social life; that it has been so since the earliest times; and that the census could map this reality and produce caste data. In the present essay I adopt a contrasting stance. I argue that caste, as conceived in contemporary academic writings or within the policies of the state, is a new idea and that the social form imagined through this term never characterised the Indian society. Further, I suggest that this idea of caste was produced towards the end of the nineteenth century in the course of and because of the census operations.[...] I argue that caste is neither *varna* nor *jati* though it masquerades as one or the other or both at the same time.

And since caste is not the same as the other two, it must be a new category deployed for imagining Indian society.

TEXTUAL DEFINITIONS AND FIELD DATA

[P]rocedures of enumeration ... played a critical role in constituting a new idea of caste. The understanding of caste in the colonial literature in the early decades of the nineteenth century was primarily text-based. The colonial officials like William Jones and Henry Colebrook, writing from towards the close of the eighteenth century, considered Sanskrit texts as the authentic sources of knowledge about the Hindus. Hence these officials, also called the Sanskritists, despite being aware of the presence of the jatis, treated the text-derived varna order to be representing the original and the authentic caste system.

The empirical approach of the census led to a fundamental change in outlook: the focus shifted from text to people. The social space was marked as the habitat of the real; the verification of truth came not from the pages of the Sanskrit texts but the experience of the lived lives of men and women. As per the new norms, the varna model was put through the empirical test, and rejected. Society was populated not only with Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. Simultaneously, the questioning of the credibility of the propagator of this model—Manu—started. Let me cite here some of the officers associated with the census of different provinces in 1872. Referring to the 'Code of Manu and some of the Puranas [that] profess to give an account of the institution of castes', Cornish (1874: 121, 122), who supervised operations in the Madras Presidency, commented: 'It is plain that in a critical inquiry regarding the origin of caste we can place no reliance upon the statements made in the Hindu sacred writings. Whether there was ever a period in which the Hindus were composed of four classes is exceedingly doubtful.' Similarly,

C. F. Magrath, the officer entrusted with the compilation of castes from Bihar, stated, 'it was necessary, if the classification was to be of any use, that the now meaningless division into the four castes alleged to have been made by Manu should be put aside' (cited in Beverley 1872: 155).

The critique of Manu, in a broader sense, was addressed to the text-based exposition of Indian society as presented by the Sanskritists. Yet, as Trautmann points out, the legacy of William Jones, Henry Colebrook and later Max Muller and John Muir continued to figure in and configure the terms of investigation at a time when anthropological interpretations had begun to displace the text-based versions of caste (Trautmann 1997: 26, 191-206). Furthermore, in the face of the presence of the divergent jatis during the surveys, the anthropological theories found corroboration of the idea of caste as a single entity in concepts drawn from Sanskrit texts. Hence, the allusion to the ideas of *varna samkara* (narrowly interpreted as miscegenation) or the separate function of brahmin, kshatriya, vaishya and shudra when caste was interpreted respectively as an endogamous or occupational division.

Thus the textual categories, though disputed, could not be discarded during the empirical shift in the understanding of caste. At the same time the bases and the connotations of these categories were radically altered. For example, while the varna model was refuted, some of its components could still find a place in the census reports. The brahmins and the Rajputs were indeed included in the classificatory table of the NWP in 1872. However, the inclusion took place not before the physical presence of these communities could be verified. Thus, F. S. Growse, who had helped Plowden in preparing the caste table of the NWP, wrote that in the province the brahmins numbering around 3,234,342 were 'still a living entity' and the kshatriyas were 'adequately represented in modern speech by the word Thakur, or

Rajput' though the vaishyas and the shudras had 'completely disappeared' (cited in Plowden 1873: lxxix). The integrity of the varna order was broken; hollowed out of the earlier connotations, the constituting groups when individually appropriated were suffused with new meanings. The census, I believe, was accompanied with a process of *empiricalisation* of textual traditions. In the course of enumeration, the components of the varna order, i.e. brahmin, kshatriya, etc. were *empiricalised*: attributed a visible and verifiable body. Caste, henceforth, was recognised necessarily as an empirical category. It is in the context of empirical inquiry, I should also add, that the academic tradition of counterpoising varna and jati in terms of textual vs real (or for that matter, ideal vs actual, original vs contemporary) started. The tradition continues in the writings on caste even today.

REFINING THE DEFINITION OF CASTE

Let us return to the census of India in 1881, which also happened to be the first synchronous survey of the population to be conducted in the country. The question that had assumed seminal significance for the project was that of maintaining uniformity in the classification of castes. The source of the problem lay in the nature of jati: the multiple connotations of jati did not bear out the official perception of caste having a fixed and uniform boundary. [...]

It was increasingly being acknowledged that to count it was first necessary to know what caste was. In 1882, W. C. Plowden, the outgoing census commissioner, recommended that in every province 'some officer who has a taste for, and a knowledge of, archaeological research' should be deputed to compile information about caste. The 'advantage of having such information at hand at the next census', he concluded, needed 'no comment'. Responding to the

recommendation, the Government of Bengal appointed H. H. Risley, in 1885, to conduct a survey of castes and occupations of the people of the province (APAC SCD L/E/7/73, Register 521, No 91½, January 1884).[...]

The results of the survey of Bengal undertaken by Risley were published in 1891 in four volumes entitled the *Tribes and Castes of Bengal*; subsequently, under the generic title of *Tribes and Castes* glossaries of communities were compiled and published for the North-Western Provinces and Oudh (1896), Southern India (1909), Punjab and North-Western Provinces (1911) and the Central Provinces (1916). Generally, the glossaries came prefaced with a long essay where the respective authors attempted to explicate caste: its origin, history, salient characteristics, etc. These essays aimed to investigate and discover the defining feature/s on the basis of which castes could be identified and separated from amongst the diverse jatis living in society.

Three brief qualifications need to be added here. First, when formulating their respective anthropological explanations of caste, the colonial scholars did not and could not exclude the concepts found in the Sanskrit texts. Second, prior to the beginning of the ethnographic surveys sponsored by the provincial governments, some census officials like James Bourdillon and Denzil Ibbetson did try to investigate caste. However, such attempts were borne out of personal curiosity and were not part of the colonial state's initiative. Finally, despite consenting to conduct a survey of tribes and castes in certain provinces, classification remained the primary concern of the colonial state. Accordingly, the state tried to limit the investment, both material and academic, in anthropological researches and keep it germane to the specific problem. In short, while the moves made by the state in the post-1881 phase were ethnographic, the same cannot be said about its nature. Nonetheless, change had come to mark the project of

census; unlike their predecessors, census commissioners in the following decades, before embarking on the exercise of classification, engaged in clarifying what caste was.

STATUS OR FUNCTION

The section entitled 'The Distribution of the Population by Race, Tribe, or Caste' in the general report on the census of India in 1891 opened with an analysis of caste. Caste, wrote J. A. Baines, the census commissioner, referred to '*status* or function' that was perpetuated by 'inheritance and endogamy' (Baines 1893: 182). Despite signalling function as the basis of caste, the author, when it came to elucidating the genesis of the institution, shifted to race. The origin of caste, he believed, was 'distinctly racial' (ibid.: 183); it was the result of the struggle of 'the Arya' to keep out 'the dark races' (ibid.: 183).

The wavering emphasis on function and race in the writing of Baines was caused by the two differing interpretations of caste, operational at this time. Denzil Ibbetson, William Crooke and John Nesfield had offered a functional explanation, while Herbert Risley, in the course of his survey of Bengal, had propounded a racial theory of caste. The parallel influence of these theorisations can also be seen in the act of classification. In order to ensure uniformity in returns, caste groups, declared Baines, were arranged in the census tables 'mainly' on the basis of 'function' (ibid.: 188-89). Yet, even a cursory look at such arrangements reveals that the census commissioner had also used the category of race to name the classificatory columns (ibid.: 188, 207-08).

The lack of consistency was thus the chief defect in the explanation of caste as presented in the general report on the census of 1891. Risley, who became census commissioner of India for the 1901 edition of the project, observed later that the report prepared by his predecessor

provided only 'a patchwork classification in which occupation predominates, varied here and there by considerations of caste, history, tradition, ethnical affinity, and geographical position' (Risley 1903: 538).

The census of India in 1901 witnessed the most comprehensive attempt made by any census commissioner yet to understand caste. Using anthropological concepts and the data relating to physical features of local population collected during the survey of Bengal and later from a few other provinces, Risley forged his racial theory of caste. He presented the initial version of this theory in 1891 in an essay entitled 'Caste in Relation to Marriage', though it should be mentioned here that he was not the first scholar to discuss the idea of race in the Indian context. The genesis of caste, according to this explanation, lay in the 'fact' (ibid.: 555) of racial difference. Briefly, when the tall, fair and sharp-nosed Aryans entered India from the north, they encountered the short, dark and stub-nosed Dravidians. In order to prevent intermixture of blood and loss of purity of their race, the Aryans instituted restrictions on marriage with the local race. From such restrictions evolved the structure that we know as caste (ibid.: 555).

The responsibility of the census commissioner, however, was not to provide an academic explanation about the origin of caste in the remote past. The onus rather was to specify the criteria that could be used to identify and classify castes in the present. Once again Risley was confronted with the same question that had tormented his predecessors. What was caste? And once again Risley was presented with the same answer: the jatis on the ground were far from homogeneous. Let us hear the census commissioner himself dwelling upon the dilemma:

In a country where the accident of birth determines irrevocably the whole course of a man's social and

domestic relations... one thing that he may be expected to know with certainty, and to disclose without much reluctance, is the name of the caste... to which he belongs.

Yet, when asked about his caste, wrote a dismayed census commissioner (ibid.: 537), a respondent might actually give the name of

... an obscure caste... a sect... a sub-caste... an exogamous sect... a hypergamous group... may describe himself by... occupation or... the province or tract of country from which he comes.

So, which name from among these was that of caste? Circumstances demanded clarity on the issue; to count and collate, it was necessary to fix the identifying marker. Hence, in the census report of 1901, appeared a 'definition' (ibid.: 517) of caste. Caste had several characteristics, Risley wrote; it 'may be defined as a collection of families ... associated with a specific occupation; claiming common descent'. But more than anything else, caste was 'almost invariably endogamous' (ibid.). Alongside Risley also declared that castes should be classified according to the 'principle' of 'social precedence' (ibid.: 538).

A PATCHWORK OF DEFINITIONS

Neither the criterion of identifying castes nor that of classifying these could deliver the desired results. Endogamy could not be the defining marker of caste; as we know a large number of jatis, perhaps a majority of these, are not actually endogamous. For example, within the fold of the Kurmi jati in Bihar were/are present the following groups: Awadhia, Chanaur, Ghamela, Jaiswar, Kachaisa, Ramaiya, etc. Erroneously called 'sub-castes' by many sociologists, these are the groups that actually practise endogamy: thus, an awadhia would not be inclined to marry a ghamela or a chanaur. A similar situation prevails in the

case of the Kamma jati of Andhra Pradesh which encompasses the below named groups: Gampa, Illuvellani, Godajati, Kavali, Vaduga, Pedda, Bangaru. Going by the academic criterion of endogamy, awadhia or illuvellani and not kurmi or kamma should be treated as a caste and yet doing so would completely violate the popular opinion on the subject. Hence, Risley's definition of caste remained inapplicable.

Risley also failed in his attempt to classify castes on a pan-Indian scale according to the principle of 'social precedence'. The divergence in the nature of jatis naturally implied the absence of a singular scale to measure status or construct hierarchy. The census commissioner himself later observed: 'Castes can only be classified on the basis of social precedence. No scheme of classification can be framed for the whole of India' (ibid.: 557). No pan-Indian classificatory table was presented in the report on the census of 1901.

Risley had criticised the classificatory tables containing the results of the census of 1891 as a 'patchwork', yet even a small sample from the census report prepared under his guidance reveals a similar situation. Thus, some of the names included in the caste table of the report on the census of Bengal in 1901 were the following: Chamar, Halwai, Baniya, Madrasi, Marwari, Manipuri, Burmese, Chinese, Japanese, Bengali, Maratha, Sikh, Baishnab (Bairagi), Buddhist, Munda, Santal, Oraon, Ahir, kurmi, Barna-sankar, etc. (Gait 1902: 192-266). Tentatively these communities can be described as professional, regional (both from within and outside the country), linguistic, religious/sectarian, tribal (according to the records of the state), and only locally known groups. Risley indeed was able to compile a list of castes made up of the heterogeneous jatis as his predecessors and successors had done.

In fact, in a similar manner the state as well as the academicians in contemporary India also have been producing caste lists. However, the question that must be asked is the following: what is it that is common between, say, chamar, marwari, munda and kurmi that qualify these to be parts of a list of castes. How can we decide whether baniya is a caste or not? The only factor that seems to be uniting the names that form the list of castes cited above is that these are seen to belong to different communities. Jati, in the first place, then, signifies a community. Caste on the other hand is also imagined as a community but a community of a *particular* type. The particularity of caste is inscribed in the features attributed to it: a definite and singular hierarchy with perhaps the brahmin at the top and the so-called 'Untouchables' at the bottom, a specific set of practices relating to endogamy or commensality, etc. These particularities do not uniformly apply to the jatis and this is why jati as understood in indigenous traditions and society is not the same as caste.

In the midst of lengthy academic expositions and scores of classificatory tables, caste had a troubled presence in the pages of the census reports. No exhaustive list of castes could ever be prepared for any province, let alone for the country as a whole, every such list was completed only by adding columns named as 'other castes', 'castes not specified/not known', etc.; no list was ever submitted without questions being asked whether those enlisted were really castes; no two reports on the census of India ever matched in the way these classified castes; no inventory of caste was ever compiled without the presiding census commissioner expressing misgivings about the whole project.

The enumeration of caste continued given its deemed administrative relevance. However, no sooner had the pan-Indian census started than the state was compelled to try and trim down its engagement with the subject. During the

census of 1881 it was decided that only those castes having a minimum numerical strength of 100,000 would be classified; after 1901, following the failure of Risley to construct a pan-Indian classificatory table, the practice of classifying castes in the census itself was given up, castes from now onwards were enlisted alphabetically; in 1931, the last general counting of castes took place. Thus, after more than six decades of enumeration, the census authorities failed to provide the criteria to identify caste and classify these groups. Yet, the very structure of the census first generated and then sustained the belief that caste was a uniformly definable and empirically verifiable entity. These two premises continue to configure the varying interpretations of caste today.

CONCLUSION

The *idea* of caste, as conceived in contemporary academic writings and within the policies of the state, was produced in the course of the census operations in colonial India. In the text-based explanations offered by the Sanskritists in the early decades of the nineteenth century, the brahmin, kshatriya, vaishya and shudra were treated as authentic castes; jatis enjoyed no distinct conceptual status, the assumption being that these could be subsumed, at least theoretically, within the varna order.

The onset of the census operations from the middle of the nineteenth century signalled fundamental changes. Empirical surveys showed the varna division to be non-existent; the focus now shifted onto the numerous jatis populating the social space. The project entailed that the diverse jatis be first counted, and then classified within a new pan-Indian template. The obligation was novel and unparalleled. The jatis, along with their assumed numerical strength, had been enlisted earlier too; however, these communities stood in such lists as discrete units. The

summing up of number in the census, on the other hand, was possible only if the entities counted were made comparable. The compulsion, under the circumstances, was to find the feature/s common to the otherwise divergent jatis, so that these could be defined and demarcated uniformly.

In search of the defining features, the state started investing in ethnographic surveys and was gradually drawn into a nexus, which was not always complementary, with the western academic complex. Consensus eluded (and still eludes) any definition of caste. Nevertheless, the ethnological investigations in the context of statistical requirements eventually produced a dogma—of caste being an empirically verifiable entity with a uniform and fixed boundary across the country. Once delimited, caste was endowed with a singular history of origin (racial, occupational, etc.), a set of common practices, and a structure. Its pan-Indian architecture included the varna names. Though much doubted on empirical grounds, these categories, because of being known beyond a locality, could still serve the state's agenda of classifying the jatis. However, in the course of their selective appropriation, brahmin, kshatriya, vaishya and shudra were first *empiricalised* and then interpreted to be merely denoting ranks. Boundary and hierarchy thus became the two dimensions characterising the new caste system conceived in the context of counting and classification.

The image of caste moved from the pages of the census reports into the domain of the state and the wider academia. The census was an official project and its impact on the state policies was only understandable. Further, the census remains till date the only non-sample based all India survey. Hence, it constituted the ground from which it became possible to talk of an empirical and uniform pan-Indian caste. It is not a mere coincidence, as Cohn (1990: 241–42) has pointed out, that most of 'the basic treatises on

the Indian caste system written during the period 1880 to 1950' were by men entrusted with the supervision of the census operations either at the provincial or all-India levels. Denzil Ibbetson, J. A. Baines, H. H. Risley, E. Thurston, E. A. Gait, J. H. Hutton are a few of those names that can be cited in this regard.

Caste, I believe, cannot be equated either with varna or jati. The components of the varna order are not indeterminate; yet, these are not empirically verifiable. The presence of jatis, on the other hand, can be observed; however, these never had a singular and uniform identity in the Indian society. Caste thus is fundamentally different from both varna and jati; yet, because of its associations with both varna-names and jati-practices struck in the course of the census operations, it has been misconceived as a component of indigenous society.

To illustrate this, let us explore what the expression 'brahmin caste', so commonly used in both academic and everyday parlance, could mean. Translated textually, 'brahmin varna' cannot denote a group of people physically existing, though, that is the idea the word caste labours to convey. Its empirical rendering as 'brahmin jati', on the other hand, would be fallacious—there has never been nor could there ever be a jati in Indian society called brahmin. Kanyakubja Brahmin, Maithil Brahmin, Namboodiri Brahmin, Chitpavan Brahmin, etc. are some of the groups regarded in the census reports as brahmin castes. Significantly, in all these names, the word brahmin neither comes alone, nor as a prefix. It is conjoined as a suffix and actually appears as part of the identity of the diverse jatis.

In a similar fashion, the question 'what is caste?' routinely asked in classrooms and beyond generates an ambiguous sense. Is the question about varna or is it about jati? These two, I have repeatedly emphasised, are not identical questions and therefore anticipate different answers. Caste, hence, is an idea of recent origin that emerged by

displacing the text-based varna order on the one hand and suppressing the multifariousness of the jatis on the other. Though there was no prior design shaping its production, a pan-Indian caste system in its empirical avatar appeared initially towards the close of the nineteenth century in the documents of the state. Hence, the use of the category of caste in place of varna and jati, in historical explanations of the Indian society or in the framing of policies by the state in contemporary times, can only be misleading.

I should perhaps add before I conclude that I am not trying to suggest that there was no hierarchy or discrimination in society before the birth of 'caste'. Both varna and jati, which have been different and yet interacting parts of indigenous traditions since ancient times, carry their respective notions of hierarchy. In fact, I believe that by avoiding the generalised structure of hierarchy as presented within the caste system, we could understand better the specific constituents of authority that have been operating in Indian society.

THE POLITICS OF NOT COUNTING CASTE*

SATISH DESHPANDE AND MARY E. JOHN

An obvious and striking feature of the debate on the proposed 'caste census' is that it concerns counterfactuals—'what if' scenarios rather than actual facts. It is thus inevitable that both opponents and proponents argue by analogy and assertion, extrapolating from other times and contexts to make their case. Far from inevitable, however, is the careless extravagance of much of the argument. The treacherous terrain of counterfactuals demands that we be cautious about the weight we place on our speculative assertions. It also requires us to be sensitive to the inherent asymmetry of such debates.

Given that the Census does not count caste today and that the debate is about whether it should, the burden of proof is unequally distributed. Those who want a change in the status quo have to shoulder a heavier load than those who are content with the way things are. This is just the way that arguments about counterfactuals are structured, and it would be bad faith for pro-changers (like us) to claim underdog status.

However, an important but often invisible aspect of this structural asymmetry is that the status quo escapes strict scrutiny. Without such scrutiny, both sides tend to calibrate their arguments as though the status quo represented a neutral state, a sort of zero-point, against which the possible negatives and positives are measured. But this need not be true—the status quo does not default to neutral just because we are debating counterfactuals. If the

present already has a strongly negative or positive value, the impact of the future needs to be assessed differently. In short, we must re-calibrate our present, and to do that we need to also ask questions like: What kinds of damage has India suffered because a caste census has *not* been held since Independence? What is the politics of *not* counting caste?

While the main objective of this essay is to ask questions of this sort, the following sections revisit the debate on the caste census in an attempt to identify the implicit assumptions and tacit contrasts that shape the most common arguments on view. As proponents of a caste census we are certainly not neutral, but we hope to show that it is not the presence of bias—whether our own or of the others—that makes for bad arguments, but rather the absence of care.

IMPLICIT MODELS OF CASTE AND CENSUS

At the risk of oversimplifying, the most common arguments against a caste census are of two broad kinds—those that invoke political-moral grounds, and those that cite insurmountable practical-logistical difficulties. The most common pro-caste census arguments tend to be mostly political-moral, with some practical-logistical counter-arguments against the claims of opponents. Though they may often appear so, pro and con arguments are not necessarily mirror images of each other. However, both are based on implicit ideas about the nature and role of caste and the Census.

At least three distinct models of what the Census is and ought to do are at work behind these arguments. The first sees the Census as an extension or analogue of a *welfare programme* or social justice initiative. In this view, the Census is an instrument for rationalising such programmes making them more efficient and effective. A second model

of the Census is that of a *device for fixing identities*, or creating 'compulsory identities'. In this view, the Census will forever fix the caste identity of every citizen and thus comprehensively sabotage the project of creating a universal Indian citizen. Less common than the previous two but significant in its own right is a third model of the Census as a gigantic *research project* designed to produce the truth about the categories it counts. In this view, the Census is useful only if it is accurate and truthful; otherwise it is a waste or a liability.

While these three are the most commonly employed models, there is also one other model that has either been absent or only fleetingly present in the English media, but has received more play in the Hindi press (as has the caste census debate more generally). This fourth model of the Census, familiar to us from the literature on nationalism, is that of a *collective self-portrait*. Like maps, flags and other mnemonic devices, the Census is a representation of the nation; it helps us to concretise an abstractly imagined national community. Seen from this angle a Census is not just about social justice programmes, or fixing identity, or a source of knowledge. It is a collection of our collective identities. Because it is available to all, it offers a chance for all groups to look at themselves in relation to others. Only the Census can provide such an aggregated, comprehensive picture of the collectivities that comprise the nation—no individual or group has the resources or the power to do this.

A comparable effort to list the different models of caste that seem to be at work would yield the following: The first and probably most common model is the one in which caste actually means *lower caste*, roughly in the same way that gender comes to mean 'women' and race comes to mean 'non-whites'. In this perspective, caste is about the concerns and problems of the lower castes, including especially reservations, quotas and vote banks. Another

model of caste heavily influenced by social anthropology sees it as a *complex meaning-giving institution* of great importance in ordering everyday life. This perspective is concerned to emphasise the complexity of caste and its irreducibility to other social structures like class or ethnicity. A third perspective sees caste as a *web of distributional relations* that determines the distribution of power, privilege and material resources in conjunction with class. From this perspective, caste is necessarily relational—the parts do not make sense outside of the whole they fit into, although ‘fit’ need not imply harmony and is compatible with conflict. Finally, a fourth perspective on caste sees it as the single most important *obstacle to attaining modernity*. Caste is a peculiarly Indian affliction, one that is based on clearly un-modern values and it prevents us from becoming fully modern and embracing values of individualism and universality.

These sketchy and rather brief ‘models’ of census and caste are clearly too rudimentary for too much weight to be placed on them. They are not meant to be exhaustive—it is surely possible to think of others—but only to indicate the variety of available vantage points. They are all partial, in the sense that the existence of one hardly precludes the others. They are also partial in the sense that they are more or less hospitable to different perspectives on caste, and, more specifically, to different positions vis-a-vis a caste census. In other words, models of caste and census combine to structure arguments for or against a caste census. One could also say that they determine the possibilities and limits of these arguments. It is not our contention that there is any neat or necessary correspondence between these models; rather, our main point is that, when analysing arguments in this debate, it is useful to look for the implicit models that may be animating them.

We now turn to the most common arguments encountered in the caste census debate. As proponents, we pay special attention to the arguments of opponents, saving a brief description of our preferred 'pro' argument for the conclusion.

LOGISTICAL CHALLENGES

Perhaps the most common argument against a caste census, one specially favoured by academics, is that it simply cannot be done. There are many strands to this broad argument and they need to be carefully sifted. The thickest strand combines the research project model of the Census with the complex-meaning-giving-institution model of caste to argue that the capabilities of the former are much too meagre to capture the many-sided intricacies of the latter.

One variant of this strand insists that caste is too fluid and polyvalent an identity: the question, 'What is your caste?' can have more than one (sometimes several) context-dependent answers. This usually arises from the fact that, at the micro end, 'caste' usually subsumes within it other distinct entities like sub-caste, sub-sub-caste, etc. and at the macro end may itself merge with other castes to form a larger caste-group (such as Maratha or Lingayat, or broader still, Kshatriya for example). I may answer the question differently depending on whether I am seeking a bride for my son, seeking a favour from someone, or deciding who to vote for. While this is quite plausible, it is still difficult to see why or how this poses a problem for the Census. The typical Indian respondent is not likely to be in any fundamental existential doubt about her caste, for this is a luxury available only to the upper-caste urban elite. As for the context-dependence of caste names, this is not a major problem precisely because the Census enumerator's arrival at my door itself represents a very specific context,

and my response will simply be whatever I believe to be appropriate for this context. The fact that I may have responded differently in other contexts is irrelevant here. In fact, one can go further to argue that the Census should in fact ask about synonyms for caste names where they exist and are relevant. Thus, in addition to a question such as 'What is the name of your caste?' there could be a follow-up question like 'Is your caste known by any other names in your locality?' Finally, as an additional aid to future tabulation and grouping, one could also ask for the family surname, if any. (Assuming that this is a household level question asked of the head of the household alone.)

It must not be forgotten that since 2001 the Census has had access to technology far superior to that of earlier editions. In particular there is now character recognition software that enables scanning and digitisation of handwritten forms, very inexpensive digital storage media, reliable methods of data retrieval, and, above all, the possibility of retaining raw data down to the unit level, so that downstream procedures for grouping and consolidation are reversible in a cost less manner. What this means in practice is that synonyms are not a problem, nor is the gathering of additional information, which is constrained only by the time available to enumerators to canvas each schedule. Unlike what is often implied by opponents, synonyms are certain to be centripetal rather than centrifugal, i.e. they will be tightly concentrated around a central core rather than diverging greatly from it. It is very unlikely that persons with some local knowledge (like the local schoolteacher who is the most common enumerator) will be unable to recognise the family resemblance common to synonyms.

Given that the admittedly difficult job of collation, grouping and consolidation need only be done later and post-digitisation, significant economies of scale can be harnessed. For instance, Census 2001 set up two special

task forces in the office of the Registrar General of India to oversee this process for the religion and the caste (Scheduled Caste [SC] and Scheduled Tribe [ST]) data. The same can be done for caste data, and this task force can access local knowledge and compare the data with past records in order to suggest the most prudent modes of consolidation. Should errors be pointed out, digital data bases ensure seamless and costless corrections.

At a different level, while the Census ought to be accountable for the reliability and validity of its data, the standards of this accountability must be determined with reference to its role and function. It would be absurd to make the Census accountable in the same way and to the same extent that an individual ethnographer is held accountable for her data. For each produces 'truths' that the other cannot, nor does one falsify the other.

LARGE NUMBERS?

Another puzzling argument presents the very large number of castes that will be returned as a self-evidently decisive objection. For example, the 2001 Census enumerated a total of 1,234 castes in the SC category and 698 tribes in the ST category. Incidentally, between them, the 1971, 1981 and 1991 Censuses returned a total of 1,700 religion names, which were analysed by a working group set up for this purpose. Do these numbers make the SC-ST or the religion data useless? In a country of 1.2 billion people—that is 12 followed by eight zeroes—large numbers are likely to be the rule rather than the exception. As such, they do not signify anything in and of themselves.

An implied argument could be that such large numbers are hard to handle in the sense of comparing, contrasting and so on. The problem here is that the starting point is itself artificial. The fact that there are 1,234 SCs in India has no meaning at the all-India level because the schedules

are territorial, that is to say, SCs and STs are recognised only in a specific geographical context. In fact, a useful general principle for a caste census is to insist on a conservative strategy for aggregation. The district or even the sub-district or taluka level could be set as the default threshold, with aggregation beyond this point having to be clearly justified. The availability of disaggregated data will enable informed debate and act as a built-in antidote to the misuse of data. This also makes the Census the only possible source for this level of disaggregation, since no other data source, not even the National Sample Surveys, can provide meaningful sample sizes at the district level.

The main point, however, is not simply to prove that counting caste is logistically and practically feasible, which it clearly is. Rather, it is that the Census is not an instrument for producing the 'truth' about caste. With variables like caste, religion, or language the Census effectively records what respondents wish to be recorded, subject to local consistency checks, and this is how it should be.

The fears of falsification of Census data are often exaggerated and not thought through carefully. Some commentators even go so far as to suggest that people would simply 'choose' what caste to return themselves as, based on expectations of personal gain. This is a rather curious view because the caste that you name in the Census entitles the individual respondent to nothing at all. Benefits such as reservations, etc. depend upon a caste certificate, something which is entirely unrelated to the Census. Given that the Census is counting what people would like to be counted, its main purpose is precisely to perform this act of aggregation that no individual or group can do. In this sense, the Census is indeed about that elusive level of reality called the social, which emerges into view only through aggregation. Though comprised only of individuals, this aggregate turns out to be much larger in

social significance than the sum of its parts. Given all this, it is somewhat beside the point to worry about 'false information'; indeed, it is hard to figure out what 'false' and 'true' might mean here.

In this sense, and with respect to variables like caste or religion, the Census is something like a mandatory opinion poll.

POLITICAL OBJECTIONS

This brings us to the political objections to a caste census, the lead argument in which is the claim that to count caste is to return to the colonial era of divide and rule. Even within the framework of this argument it is clear that the colonial census did not only divide but provided powerful support for nationalism and the idea of India. On the other hand, one needs to be clear about where one is standing when talking of divide and rule. From the perspective of the vast majority of the Indian population subjected to centuries of elite rule, the existence of a higher power enabled an otherwise improbable revolt against native authority. It is only from the perspective of an elite that sees itself as the 'owner' of the nation that any and all subaltern claims for power sharing will seem divisive. Finally, the contemporary context needs to be stressed. What could divisiveness mean in the twenty-first century when there is simply no future in secessionism and the only agenda is power sharing within existing state jurisdictions or boundaries? In short, this is a very different time from the mid-twentieth century when new nations were being born everywhere. It is not just those who are labelled as divisive who have vested interests; calls for unity are seldom innocent and are often anything but altruistic.

Other arguments stress the ways in which a caste census will turn into a mess of political manoeuvring, as everyone attempts to 'choose' the caste identity that provides

maximum advantage. Here again it is necessary to reiterate the point that it is not the task of the Census to capture the 'pure truth' of caste apart from what people say they are. The Census cannot stand outside of the politics of its time. But what is often forgotten is that the politics of caste identities is not infinitely fluid and malleable, whether at the level of the individual or the group. For most Indians, caste is an interrelational identity embedded in the politics of everyday life. It is only from the perspective of those who do not live such an identity that it can somehow be turned into something purely instrumental and volitional. At most, attempts will be made by already active social movements and groups to try and use the Census to their advantage, but the Census will not be the creator of such movements. If, indeed, large numbers of people are claiming to be another caste, then perhaps it is time that the Census record this. This is also why it is necessary to ask people in more than one way about their local caste identity.

The politics of counting religion might be instructive about the possible effects of counting caste. In 1995 when the 1991 Census population tables based on religion were first made public, right-wing Hindu groups (and scholars) tried to use this data to prove that Muslims would soon outnumber Hindus. These were the years of the rise of the Hindu right in all its ferocity. The subject of the rate of growth of Muslims relative to others has since figured in many contexts, political and academic alike, and has seen different arguments being made, including demographic evidence that, at every socio-economic level, Muslim families on average have one child more than their Hindu counterparts. A decade later, the same Census data has been put to very different use by the much cited report on the 'Economic and Social Status of Muslims in India', popularly known as the Sachar Committee Report. This report has helped engineer a shift in the public perception of Muslims as a 'pampered minority' to that of a community

that in social, educational and economic terms is one of the most disenfranchised in the country. This, too, is politics, if clearly for the better.

BREAKING WITH ‘CASTE BLINDNESS’

We come now to the models and arguments that we ourselves favour. Our central point is that *not* counting caste has been one of independent India's biggest mistakes. Perhaps this mistake could not be avoided as it only became visible retrospectively. But at least for the last two decades, the damage wrought by this policy of ‘caste-blindness’ has been plainly visible for anyone who cares to see it. Most arguments against a caste census treat the implicit contrast with the status quo as though it were neutral—it is not. In fact, arguments against a caste census need to ask not only if we would be worse off with it, but also if we are better off without it. The model of the Census we are partial to is that of a collective self-portrait, which, along with a model of caste that emphasises its role as a distributional axis, yields the argument outlined below.

The most important reason to ask for a caste census is because it offers the opportunity to break with the model of caste blindness that the Indian state and mainstream polity has followed since Independence. Starting from the premise that caste was to be singled out for abolition, the notion of caste blindness combined the formal abolition of caste in the Constitution with what amounted to a ban on public discussion of caste. The STs and SCs were treated as a regrettable exception to the rule of caste blindness. However, the formal abolition of caste was not accompanied by serious attempts to abolish its substantive privileges and disprivileges. This half-hearted caste blindness encouraged the perpetuation and deepening of caste inequalities under a supposedly casteless Constitution. Half a century of this perspective brought us

to Mandal, or the point where a large plurality of lower castes could no longer ignore the contradiction between their political entitlements and their actual share in the nation. The flip side of rising caste consciousness among the lower castes was the fostering of the upper caste belief that they had left caste behind and were now casteless. For the most privileged sections of the upper castes this was true in a certain sense because three generations of caste blindness had allowed them to fully encash their caste advantages. They were now in a situation where they no longer needed to invoke caste explicitly, having acquired all the other resources that guaranteed them the 'legitimate' advantages of inherited wealth, expensive education and abundant connections among their own kind. It is these groups of upper castes who are the most vociferous advocates of caste blindness today. It is they who believe that the Census is mainly about and for the lower castes and their squabbling about quotas. The collective portrait model of the Census insists that everyone's caste be counted and that the upper castes be denied the anonymity that they have enjoyed under caste blindness.

In this sense, a caste census can mark the end of a remarkably unsuccessful phase of India's attempt to transcend caste and inaugurate a fresh initiative.

In our view, therefore, arguments in favour of a caste census should begin by detailing the harm that its absence has done and is doing to our ambitions of annihilating caste. Today we are in a situation where caste is exclusively associated with India's lower castes, especially Dalits and Adivasis, who must prove their membership as SCs and STs by giving identifiable caste and tribe names. We have been arguing that this situation must change in favour of a fuller, more inclusive picture, where everyone must answer the question of their caste. This is by no means an endorsement of an unequal system. Saying one has 'no caste' is an option for those who wish to exercise it. However, it is in the

interests of a democratic politics that the false image of caste as the exception suffered only by its most discriminated citizens give way to a situation where we are willing to recognise that caste is relational. There is no caste disprivilege without a corresponding privilege accruing to some other caste. It is this mutual connectedness that we have denied so strenuously throughout our post-colonial history.

It is time to recognise that contrary to Kabir's famous *prem gali* (or alley of love and devotion) which admits only one at a time, the alley of caste requires that we enter and leave together. A universal caste census for all Indians will be a fitting acknowledgement of the undeniable fact that, when it comes to caste and its injustices, our complicity and our redemption are both inescapably mutual.

SECTION

V

Caste and Gender

CONCEPTUALISING BRAHMANICAL PATRIARCHY IN EARLY INDIA

*Gender, Caste, Class and State**

UMA CHAKRAVARTI

Studies of women in early Indian history have tended to focus on what is broadly termed as the 'status of women', which in turn has led to a concentration of attention on a limited set of questions such as marriage law, property rights, and rights relating to religious practices, normally viewed as indices of status. The limited focus has left a major lacuna in our understanding of social processes which have shaped men, women and social institutions in early India. It is now time to move away from questions of 'status' whether high or low, and to look instead at the structural framework of gender relations, i.e. to the nature and basis of the subordination of women and its extent and specific form in early Indian society.[...]

The general subordination of women assumed a particularly severe form in India through the powerful instrument of religious traditions which have shaped social practices. A marked feature of Hindu society is its legal sanction for an extreme expression of social stratification in which women and the lower castes have been subjected to humiliating conditions of existence. Caste hierarchy and gender hierarchy are the organising principles of the brahmanical social order and despite their close interconnections neither scholars of the caste system nor feminist scholars have attempted to analyse the relationship between the two. I will explore here (very tentatively) the relationship between caste and gender,

focusing on what is possibly the central factor for the subordination of the upper-caste women: the need for effective sexual control over such women to maintain not only patrilineal succession (a requirement of all patriarchal societies) but also caste purity, the institution unique to Hindu society. The purity of women has a centrality in brahmanical patriarchy, as we shall see, because the purity of caste is contingent upon it.[...]

The safeguarding of the caste structure is achieved through the highly restricted movement of women or even through female seclusion. Women are regarded as gateways—literally points of entrance into the caste system. The lower caste male whose sexuality is a threat to upper-caste purity has to be institutionally prevented from having sexual access to women of the higher castes so women must be carefully guarded (Ganesh 1985: 16; Das 1976: 129–45). When the structure to prevent miscegeny breaks down the brahmanical texts consider that the whole elaborate edifice of the social order that they built up has collapsed. The Kaliyuga of the future is just such a time when women of the high castes and men of the low castes will regress from their duties. The *Bhagavad Gita*, the normative text *par excellence* of the Hindus, outlines the collapse of the social and moral order when there are leakages in the closed structure of marriages. Families are broken, rites are forgotten, women are defiled, and from this corruption comes the mixing of castes (*Gita* I: 41–44). Thus, while advocating conformity all the detailing of norms for women in the brahmanical texts are a powerful admission of the power of non-conformist women, or all women who have the power to non-conform, to break the entire structure of Hindu orthodoxy. For, when women are corrupted all is lost. In the brahmanical texts, it is evident that the upper-caste woman is the object of moral panic. Through the recalcitrance of women the established property and status order can be subverted. To prevent

such a contingency women's sexual subordination was institutionalised in the brahmanical law codes and enforced by the power of the state. At the same time women's co-operation in the system was secured by various means: ideology, economic dependency on the male head of the family, class privileges and veneration bestowed upon conforming and dependent women of the upper classes, and finally the use of force when required.

I

The process of caste, class and gender stratification, the three elements in the establishment of the social order in India shaping the formation of brahmanical patriarchy, took a considerable period of time to evolve into its complex structure. Going by existing archaeological studies, which do not lend themselves easily to questions of stratification, none of the elements of stratification outlined above can be clearly traced in the evidence available to us. There are, however, some indications that in prehistoric cultures women's role in production and in reproduction was regarded as valuable.[...]

[T]he important role of women in the hunting-gathering economy, which was highly valued, was enhanced by the importance attached to the reproductive role of women. Pregnant women, women in their nurturing roles as mothers, and women portrayed in the act of childbirth are sometimes depicted in the paintings and the last has been identified as the figure of a mother goddess. Similar evidence from other prehistoric cultures in the Mesopotamian region has been used to suggest the prevalence of a pervasive veneration of the mother goddess. It has also been argued that the first form of religious expression for men and women is the psychological bond between mother and child, and that the life-giving mother appeared to have power over life and

death; thus men and women, observing this dramatic and mysterious power of the female turned to the veneration of the mother goddess (Lerner 1986: 39).

Female reproductive power in such a hunting-gathering society is regarded as valuable because the very survival of the community is dependent upon it.[...] Society in this phase has been characterised by one scholar as 'matristic'—one in which women were not subjected to the authority of men, or of other women (Neumayer 1983: 21). There would be little need in such a society for the sexual control of women by men.[...]

The post-Vedic literature reflects a twofold development of ideology. While Aryan women were being marginalised in terms of their original roles in the sacrifice their roles in the productive system were also changing. The increasing dependence on agriculture as the major source of food shifted the scene of food production outside the households to the fields; the labour of the subjugated peoples including *dasis* was extracted to work the land and this enabled the Aryan woman's labour to be restricted to the household. Thereafter the participation of a certain class of women in 'production' that was valued ceased. Such women from then onward were associated only with reproduction. Whether these developments took place with the compliance of Aryan women or not (the *dasis* of course would have had no active part to play in the creation of such a system), a degree of tension between men and women may be discerned even in the *Rig Vedic* literature where the relationship between the gods and goddesses is often depicted as hostile. There are references also to suggest that women must be rendered powerless by ensuring that they do not gain in strength and are obedient to men and follow them (Roy 1987: 23–30). The need for monitoring women's sexuality is also evident. It appears that women's sexuality is viewed as a threat, particularly in relation to the sacrifice.[...]

II

The shift to an agricultural economy and the second urbanisation (800 BC–600 BC) was marked by the emergence of caste and class divisions. The Brahmana was a force to reckon with and patrilineal succession was fairly well established within the larger context of a defined family structure distinct from the earlier structure. Some of these elements are captured in the Buddhist origin myth where the institution of caste, private property, the family, and the archaic state are represented as emerging simultaneously from an earlier stage of primitive existence (*Digha Nikaya* 111 80ff). These changes, i.e. the emergence of a fairly stratified society and the collapse of tribal economy and polity in the post-Vedic period, especially with the establishment of private control over land (Chakravarti 1987: 23ff), held and transmitted within a patrilineal system, accompanied by the beginning also of patrilineal succession to kingship, and the preservation of caste purity meant that the sexual behaviour of certain categories of women needed to be closely guarded. Wives in particular required to be under male control and this view finds explicit mention in a later text, the Apastamba Dharma Sutra (circa 6th century BC), which rules that a husband should ensure that no other man goes near his wife lest his seed get into her [11.6.13.7].

It is at this point that a sharp distinction is required to be made between motherhood and female sexuality, with the latter being channelised only into legitimate motherhood within a tightly controlled structure of reproduction, which ensured caste purity (by mating only with prescribed partners) and patrilineal succession (by restricting mating only with one man). From then on female sexuality had to be ‘managed’ and therefore a crucial question for us to pursue is ‘in whose hands does the management of female

sexuality come to reside; further do women participate in this process of management?'[...]

The congenital fickleness of women's nature is especially pertinent to the problem of dealing with the innately overflowing and uncontrollable sexuality of women. Thus, in the ancient texts it is repeatedly stated that they can never be trusted; further the *Mahabharata* states that they are difficult to control. The cunning tricks of the demons are known to be unique to women [XIII39.5J]. In another text they are linked to kings and creeping vines in that they will embrace whatever is beside them. They are adulterous by nature and are permanently on the look-out for an opportunity to seduce men: according to a Jataka story 'As greedy cows seek pasture a new, women unsated yearn for mate on mate' (Jataka 1:155).

The notion that the essential nature of women is vested in their sexuality is dealt with most explicitly by Manu, the most prominent ideologue of the brahmanical system. After ruling that women must be closely guarded day and night, regardless of their age, Manu tells us why it is that women must be guarded. Building up from the need to guard against even the most trifling 'evil' actions of women Manu argues that by carefully guarding the wife (the most important category of women as far as the brahmana ideologues were concerned) a man preserves the purity of his offspring, his family, himself, and his means of acquiring merit (IX.7). Developing his argument Manu tells us that after conception by his wife, the husband becomes an embryo and is born again of her; according to Manu that is the wifeness of a wife (IX.7-9). In order to keep his offspring 'pure' Manu enjoins the husband to carefully guard his wife lest his future is denied to him. It is women's nature which requires them to be so thoroughly restrained. According to Manu, their essential nature will drive women into seeking satisfaction anywhere, anytime, and with anyone.[...]

The most revealing statement that Manu makes in the context of women's essential nature points out:

Knowing their disposition, which the lord of creatures laid on them at creation (i.e., their reproductive power, their sexuality, their essential nature) every man should most strenuously exert himself to guard them. (Manu IX.16)

The crucial place occupied by the wife in the whole system of perpetuating the social order and in enabling men to gain immortality through their sons is explicitly articulated by Manu:

The production of children, the nurture of those born, and the daily life of men, of these matters the wife is visibly the cause. Offspring, the due performance of religious rites, faithful service and heavenly bliss for the ancestors and for oneself depend on the wife alone. (Manu X.26-27)

It was this recognition that men were dependent upon women to perpetuate the social and moral order of their making which led them to confront the problem of women's sexuality. Reproductive power was the one power that women still held in the new structure of relations in which they were subordinated and one way of dealing with it was to simultaneously exaggerate and treat as terribly dangerous women's 'innate' nature. Their uncontrolled sexuality was perceived as posing a threat and the narrative and normative literature of ancient India is thus full of references to the wickedness of women and of their 'insatiable' lust.[...]

The representation of an inordinate sexuality in the case of women of the ruling clans, landholding groups, and the priestly classes suggests that these categories are particularly concerned with 'impulse' control. While legitimacy in terms of succession explains the references to women of the king's family and the landholding groups the need to maintain caste purity explains the obsession with brahmana wives.

An interesting facet of women's 'innate' nature' (*strisvabhava*) unlike the innate natures of other subordinate groups like the Sudras was the representation of conflict between the inherent nature of women and their *dharma*. While the innate nature of the lower castes, that of rendering service to the twice-born, was in harmony with the dharma prescribed for them by the brahmanical law-givers, *strisvabhava*, women's essential nature as sexual beings, was in conflict with their *stridharma* of fidelity to the husband: their *strisvabhava* was constantly enticing them away from their *stridharma*. Significantly some myths explicitly suggest that a 'demoniac' *strisvabhava* was the maternal heritage of women whereas the *stridharma*, the duty of women was their paternal heritage, given to them by the brahmana priests (Leslie 1989: 266). These references suggest that the original attitude of prehistoric societies to the reproductive power of women, where their sexuality was accepted as an inherent part of their being and had posed no problem had given way to a system requiring stringent controls. Women's sexuality thus had now become a problem; their essential natures, their maternal power, thus had to be organised and ordered by paternal power in the emerging class-based societies to serve the new social and political arrangements organised by men of the dominant classes.

Women's general subordination was essential in this stage because it was only then that the mechanism of control upon women's sexuality could actually be effective. The mechanism of control operated through three devices and at three different levels; the first was through ideology, through the *stridharma*, or *pativrata dharma*, internalised by women who attempted to live up to the ideal notion of womanhood constructed by the ideologues of the society. In the case of Hindu society, the design of the patriarchal caste-class structure was mapped out by the brahmanas; *pativrata* the specific dharma of the Hindu wife then

became the ideology by which women accepted and even aspired to chastity and wifely fidelity as the highest expression of their selfhood.

This was the lowest level of operation and one that required control as chastity came to be viewed as the means of salvation and was therefore self-imposed. Pativrata, the ideological 'purdah' of the Hindu women was thus the mask by which the hierarchical and inequalitarian structure of the social order was reproduced with the complicity of women.

It may be argued that the success of any system lies in the subtle working of its ideology and in that sense the pativrata concept was the masterstroke of Hindu-Aryan genius. It was, in our view, one of the most successful ideologies constructed by any patriarchal system, one in which women themselves controlled their own sexuality. The actual mechanisms and institutions of control over women's sexuality, and the subordination of women, was thus completely invisibilised and with it patriarchy was firmly established as an ideology since it was 'naturalised'.

That the stridharma, or the pativratadharmā was a rhetorical device to ensure the social control of women, especially chastity, is now well accepted. As outlined by Manu and elaborated and repeated by Tryambaka in the *Stridharmapaddhati*, the stridharma was clearly an ideological mechanism for socially controlling the biological aspect of women. Women, as biological creatures, are representatives of a wild or untamed nature. But through the stridharma the biological woman can be converted into woman as a social entity, in whom the biological has been tamed! In contrast in the Kali age especially there is an inversion of the system in which women lapse into unrestrained behaviour disregarding the stridharma and throwing off all morals. The wicked and essential nature of women then must be subordinated and conquered by the virtue of the ideal wife. Once the tension between 'nature'

and 'culture' is resolved, women can emerge triumphant as paragons of virtue. It is evident from Tryambaka's text that ultimate social control is achieved when the subordinated (here women) not only accept their condition but consider it a mark of distinction.

Much attention has been focused in recent years on the ideological control upon women through the idealisation of chastity and wifely fidelity as the highest duty of women, reinforced through custom and ritual, and through constructions of notions of womanhood which epitomise wifely fidelity as in the case of Sita, Savitri, Anasuya, Arundhati and a host of other similar figures in Indian mythology. We shall therefore not labour the point. However, Manu's dictum even here outlines the importance of the ideological mechanism; in his view no man can completely guard a woman by force (Manu IX.10) and therefore it is women who of their own accord keep guard over themselves that are well guarded (Manu XI.13). Further Manu points out that a woman who 'controlling her thoughts, speech, and acts violates not her duty toward her lord, dwells with him after death in heaven' and is called *sadhvi*, a chaste woman, a faithful wife, by the virtuous (Manu IX.29). These internalised norms are the subject of much of the literature on women.[...]

By and large most women conformed to these internalised norms, or at least aspired to them in theory if not in actual practice. But in situations where the ideological level of the control over women was unsuccessful, law and customs, as prescribed by the brahmanical social code, were evoked to keep women firmly under the control of the patriarchal kinship network. The right to control a woman's total existence, especially regulating her impulses vested firmly in the male members of her family, first in her natal household and then in her conjugal household. This is a position stated most effectively by Manu but reiterated by all the major brahmanical codes. Manu's dictum, 'day and

night women must be kept in dependence (and guarded) by the males of their families' is an explicit statement of the need for stringent control upon women to safeguard them and save them from their 'innate' addiction to sensual enjoyment. He rules further that if they are not guarded they bring sorrow to two families, the one into which a woman is born and the one into which she is given (Manu IX.2-5).

Special responsibility of guarding women is laid upon the husband who is represented as most vulnerable to the loss of his progeny through the infidelity of women. Considering it the highest duty of the husband (and here he dictates explicitly for all castes) Manu enjoins that even 'weak' men must strive to guard their wives (Manu IX.6)... The authority of the male kinsmen is backed by the potential right to use coercion and physical chastisement of women who violate the norms established for them. The fear of physical punishment may appear to be only a deterrent in the normative literature but that it was actually used is clear from the narrative literature.[...]

In all the above-mentioned narratives whether physical punishment is actually used or not there is an explicit injunction to the effect that it is advisable to use violence to punish women, particularly wives, to make them conform to the requirements of wifely fidelity.

The power to use violence vests in the husband and it is recommended as the means to ensure control over the wife's sexuality, in particular, and in monitoring her behaviour more generally. But what if husbands do not succeed, even through the use of violence to bring women to heel? For such situations a third mechanism of control was envisaged in the ancient Indian patriarchal structure, with the king being vested with the authority to punish errant wives. The king functioned as the third level of control over women through whom the coercive power of the patriarchal state was articulated and used to chastise

those wives who flouted the ideological norms for women and also subverted the control of male kinsmen.

The patriarchal state of early India viewed adultery as one of the major 'crimes' in society. In the Buddhist literature only two functions are associated with kinship in early India: punishing those who commit crimes against the family, i.e. adulterers, and those who commit crimes against property, i.e. robbers. Even before the state emerged we have evidence of the notion that control over women's sexuality is the concern of the community of men that constitutes the clan in whom political authority is vested.[...]

After the emergence of the state the brahmanical normative literature and the semi-secular *Arthasastra* laid down punishments for violations of the sexual code which the king was expected to enforce. These texts reflect the more general anxiety about the husband's need for progeny to complete the religious requirements of men, and the need to ensure legitimate' succession to pass on property but there is also a concern about the maintenance of the hierarchical social order, based on caste, which must be reproduced without diluting the purity principle. The burden of reproducing it lay upon women and adultery thus took on an added significance. Manus states this explicitly while discussing adultery. According to him, 'By adultery is caused the mixture of castes among men; hence follows sin, which cuts up even the roots and causes the destruction of everything' (Manu VIII: 353).

The king, who here acts as an executor of class power, is however only the ultimate agency by which women's sexuality is controlled. To successfully establish this control, there are a variety of ways in which women's impulses' are to be curbed and these are outlined in the *Arthasastra*. The *Arthasastra* regulates the punishment enforced by male kinsmen in inculcating modest behaviour, which is considered their prerogative but must conform to

the norms laid down by the state. Thus the text states that in inculcating modest behaviour certain abuses are to be avoided. But while verbal restraint is to be exercised, the use of force itself is permitted.[...]

The *Arthashastra* clearly suggests that husbands were aided by the coercive power of the state in ensuring a firm grip on the impulse' control of women, and that through its punitive measures on the free movements of women opportunity for violations of the sexual code were effectively minimised. There is thus very little discussion on adultery itself in the *Arthashastra*. However, sections outlining the duties of a king, or those that concern laws in the brahmanical legal literature dwell at length upon adultery, as well as upon the violation of the principles governing permitted unions between men and women. Violations in both cases are considered bad but what is considered most reprehensible is the case of a high status woman involved with a lower-caste man. Gautama lays down that a woman who has connection with a lower caste man becomes an outcaste; if she commits adultery with a man of the lower caste the king shall cause her to be devoured by dogs in a public place (XXIII: 14).

It is noteworthy that according to Gautama whereas the lower caste adulterer should be killed the woman is to be publicly humiliated and suffer a more ghastly death. Vasistha on the other hand reverses the onus of the guilt somewhat and while the woman escapes the death penalty which the low-caste man must face (he is to be thrown into the fire) the king is enjoined to punish and humiliate her by shaving off her head, placing her naked on a donkey, and parading her along the highway. According to Vasistha, following this punishment, she is rid of her impurity (IXXI: 1-2).

The case of a maiden violating the caste rules for sanctioned unions between men and women is considered less reprehensible. In Manu's view the king may overlook

the offence of a 'maiden' who makes advances to a man of a high caste (this was obviously a permitted lapse) but in the case of a maiden who courts a man of a lower caste the king should force her to remain confined in the house (VIII: 365). The maiden's crime is of less gravity than the wife's, since there is no pativrata-dharma that she has violated, but Manu reserves the highest punishment for the wife who though aware of the 'greatness of her relatives' (i.e., of their high status) violates the duty that she owes to her lord, i.e. her stridharma or her pativrata-dharma. In such a situation Manu like Gautama rules that the king should cause her to be devoured by dogs in a place frequented by many (VIII: 377). In punishing such 'deviant' women the king was upholding the existing structure of relations pertaining to land and the caste order. The purity of women ensured the purity of caste and thus of the social order itself.

Much of the evidence cited in support of the role of the state in monitoring the impulses of women is in form the normative literature and therefore one cannot be certain about its working and its effectiveness. However, if we go by the basic principle of Mimamsa philosophy that something can be prohibited only if its occurrence is possible then the role of the state becomes clear.[...]

To sum up, a preliminary analysis of brahmanical patriarchy in early India reveals that the structure of social relations which shaped gender was reproduced by achieving the compliance of women. The compliance itself was produced through a combination of consent and coercion as we have tried to outline above. While the elaborate rules of normative literature and descriptions in the narrative literature indicates the failure of brahmanic ideology to produce the real consent of women to brahmanical patriarchy (thereby requiring a recourse to coercion), the values of the caste system were apparently accepted by both men and women of the upper castes.

Women's perpetuation of the caste system was achieved partly through their investment in a structure that rewarded them even as it subordinated them at the same time. That they too subscribed to the ideology of the caste system is evident from an account in the *Jatakas* of two high caste women who ran to wash their eyes when they sighted two low caste Untouchables (*Jataka* IV: No. 391). All the anxiety displayed by the early texts to monitor the upper-caste woman's sexuality maintain her purity and thus of the caste would become somewhat unnecessary once women became complicit in the larger structure in which their own subordination was embedded.

ENFORCING CULTURAL CODES GENDER AND VIOLENCE IN NORTHERN INDIA*

PREM CHOWDHRY

Most family related crimes like dowry, bride burning, rape and incest are well recognised crimes. They are given enormous publicity and draw social and academic interest, attention and condemnation. One crime which continues to go neglected and underreported relates to the inter-caste and intra-caste marriages which infringe cultural norms and customary practices. These are not infrequently run-away marriages and elopements. Perceived as common occurrences these have shown a tendency to escalate over the years. Most of them lead to direct violence perpetrated by the male family members on the couple generally and on the girl especially. Although they are decisively regarded as family or private matters, which remain hushed up and confidential affairs, some of them spill over into the wider community domain. It is in this sphere that they have attracted media attention.

The following analysis of this widespread phenomenon in rural north India throws up aspects of caste, class and gender which have a crucial inter-connection. One of its most visible manifestations is in the greater emphasis on the enforcement of caste and kinship codes. As marriage provides the structural link between kinship and caste, a closer surveillance is accorded to the marital alliances. Kinship linkages provided by marriage, and relations established through marriage, give a caste group its strength, recognition and leverage in wider society and polity. Any breach in these caste linkages brings down the

status of not only the immediate family but also the clan and finally the entire caste group. This factor was and remains a most potent consideration behind the enforcement of strict caste and sexual codes.

At the centre of these codes stands the female, control of whose sexuality and bestowal of this sexuality in marriage is crucial to patriarchal forces and their concern with caste purity, caste status, power and hierarchy. Those who infringe caste and kinship norms in marriage are dealt with extreme violence. Although emphasis placed upon caste/gender/sexual codes by upper-caste and lower-caste groups differs, any infringement of the prescribed codes commonly evokes a violent response.

A challenge to these codes has repeatedly come both from within the caste and outside. The process of democratisation and opening of economic opportunities has altered the power dynamics making for a complexity of relationships between members of different caste groups as well as between members within a caste group. In the former the growing resentment and assertiveness of the subordinate lower castes and classes not infrequently has resulted in inter-caste liaisons which infringe the upper-caste norms and sexual codes. In the latter, the young members are challenging the caste/kinship ideology upheld by the caste leadership of senior male members by breaching sexual codes and taboos, defying demands of status and hypergamy or village exogamy and discarding notions of honour. In the face of these challenges emanating mostly from the rural periphery and semi-urban-linked social groups, closely aligned with the nature of urbanisation which this region has undergone, the earlier areas of flexibility show constriction.

In a situation which is socially and legally drastically changed, such infringements are sought to be controlled by invoking claims of tradition, culture and honour and enforced through the use of power, whether that of caste,

class, gender, or seniority and finally violence. The more vocal opposition and violence is traceable to those social groups which stand to benefit most by bolstering these cultural ideas. A great deal of this reaction can be traced to the insecurity created in property matters which has increased due to the legal enablement of a family, specially a daughter, to inherit property. This intersection between caste and class has generated anxieties which have reinforced certain concerns voiced in terms of tradition and caste codes. In fact, the emerging upwardly mobile groups under new socio-economic opportunities, education and apparent modernisation show a fractured response to these codes. Some show defiance, yet others lead in upholding caste/community norms and practices. Both these responses result in furthering caste solidarities as well as caste hostilities, with one feeding the other.

However, a successfully forged alliance between cultural codes, honour and violence justifies such violence and makes for the complicity of most people cutting across social, gender and age divides. Yet, others may be coerced by the collective pressure of the community exercised through the caste and village panchayat which stands over and above the family dictates. This pressure is aided and abetted by individuals manning the state agencies who extend support to the gender and caste codes as upheld by the caste/community leadership. Their joint patriarchal surveillance allows the perpetrators of violence to go scot free. This pattern sets in motion a chain of ideological beliefs and practices validating the action, reinforcing the cultural codes and making its infringement less acceptable, more difficult and leads to violent reaction.[...]

TRANSGRESSING CASTE NORMS

Cases which evoke more violent condemnation are inter-caste marriages or rather elopements. These are frequently

village affairs and transgress the rules of village exogamy.... [S]uch marriages are considered to be 'short-lived and impermanent' or given to create problems of adjustment due to 'dissimilarity of culture' to 'problems of identity for future generations', and also significantly to the essential ones of keeping 'purity of blood'. Yet, the evidence of run-away cases suggests to the contrary and contests this cultural ideology. The agency adopted by the young towards their sexual fulfilment contradicts the idealised norms of behaviour which they voice.

This region in fact abounds in folktales regarding females of the dominant high caste running away with low-caste men, which may indeed be drawing upon certain aspects of existing social reality as given in the cases cited above. Significantly, high-caste females because of their involvement in work in the fields are considered especially vulnerable to low-caste men. Even the exclusive female songs celebrate the female sexual liaison with lower-caste men. This subversion of the sexual prowess of high-caste men by their women in the folk songs acts as a taunt and underlines the upper-caste male sexual fears of the unharnessed sexuality of their women and potent virility of low-caste men.

The liaisons between upper-caste women and lower-caste men are surfacing more frequently due to the new social pressures generated in the wake of the democratising process and greater economic opportunities being opened for lower-caste groups. Sharper caste contradictions are now emerging from new opportunities for social betterment due to economic growth benefiting some but not all lower-caste groups. The upwardly mobile among the lower-caste groups have taken significant initiative in several pockets of north India.[...]

... Nowadays the newspapers frequently highlight the growing incidents of high/low caste confrontations and violence in north India which have both caste as well as

class dimension. If on the one hand this power dynamics shows a newer kind of aggressiveness among lower castes, it also shows a new determination on the part of the dominant castes, made rich through Green Revolution technology, to keep their status and position intact especially in relation to the lower castes. Such occasions are used as an opportunity by the higher castes to assert their hegemony and to 'teach a lesson' to those who challenge it or wish to do so. Significantly, the new assertiveness of the latter is reflected in their relationship with high-caste women, witnessed in attempts at elopement and marriage.

If high-caste women are considered 'vulnerable' to low-caste men, the sexual abuse of low-caste women by high-caste men extending from rape to sexual exploitation and liaison, remains an ever growing phenomenon.... It is not as if the lower-caste women lose their 'purity' and 'honour' by mating sexually, willingly or unwillingly, but the fact that, in the eyes of upper castes, they have no 'purity' or 'honour' to begin with. Declared to be 'sexually promiscuous' by the upper-caste groups, the onus is firmly on these women for inciting the upper-caste men.[...]

This rampant sexual exploitation, essentially born out of the work situation and power equation in which low-caste women work as agricultural labourers, underlines the inability of the low-caste men to 'protect' their women and is frequently used by landowning castes as a powerful tool of domination. The spiralling effect of this is noticeable in the growing resentment of the lower-caste groups, eruption of violence and sharpening of caste consciousness and enforcement of the caste/customary codes by all castes high or low, not unoften as a form of offence as well as defence.[...]

CONSTRICTING OPPORTUNITIES

Yet, inter-caste alliances were not entirely uncommon in the colonial period. However, this was more often than not confined to a secondary alliance rather than the primary one. In the subsistence level economy of this region with its highly adverse female-male sex ratio, those agriculturists who were hard pressed economically were known to take recourse to wives from among the lower castes as well. Malcolm Lyall Darling, the famed writer and civil administrator of Punjab, maintained that a Jat would marry almost any woman he could. Frequently, these were women from the Chamar caste.

However, a faint pretence was kept that the girl was of his caste and an equally faint acceptance followed. A local belief maintains: *jat ek samunder hai aur jo bhi daruya es samunder mein parti hai woh samunder ki bun jati hai*. (The jat is like an ocean and whichever river falls into this ocean loses its identity and becomes the ocean itself.) The children of a Chuhri or Chamaran, accepted in marriage by a jat, were called jats though often they were ridiculed as *chuhri ke* or *chamaran ke*. Accounts of Brahmins marrying low-caste women are also available in folktales found in Uttar Pradesh (UP) and Haryana.

... By and large, the agricultural castes did not really look down upon lower-caste women who became their wives. This is aptly expressed in a local proverb still quoted extensively in Haryana: *beeran ki kai jaat* (women have no caste). Yet, it is significant to note that in no way was it considered an upward move for the natal family of the low-caste woman. For all purposes, she was not only purchased from her parents but was also made to terminate all connections with them after this marriage. This was essential to keep the myth of her belonging to a higher caste. It was also clear that social groups who were involved in such duplicity could not afford to and indeed did not attach undue importance to caste purity if it was breached by a man.[...]

New norms were clearly being claimed on the basis of caste purity, custom and tradition which sought to invalidate inter-caste marriages. It is clear that British courts representing higher authority had opened a way for people to claim certain rights which could not be claimed through the traditional panchayats. Interestingly, the situation is reversed now, as the traditional panchayats are being used to impose a doubtful tradition.

Significantly, all these cases relate to the *karewa* marriage which was inter-caste and not the first *biah* or *shadi* (marriage). It is in the subsequent associations that the propertied classes were opting for lower castes or inter-caste marriages and not in the primary association. This was a practice which remained confined to the lower economic strata. This association with lower caste and class came to activate the attempts of certain sections of landowning castes/classes towards maintaining caste purity not only for property reasons but also on account of their desire for upward mobility. In this they came to equate caste purity with higher status and upward mobility in Haryana. Consequently, the restrictions upon marriage tend to be accepted.

In the changed socio-economy of the postcolonial period such a breach among the dominant upper-caste groups is no longer socially acceptable. Both men and women are under pressure to remain within the caste, though this pressure on men is not as great or equal to that exercised on women. Given the persistence of highly adverse male-female sex ratio: 874 females per 1,000 males (in 1991), this has meant a large number of males remaining single. The census statistics show that the proportion of 'never married' males in Haryana in 1981 was more than the married males in all the districts of the state whereas this is reversed in the case of women; and the absolute number of married females is more than that of the married males in Haryana. Also males remain single for a long time and

they marry much later. Therefore, it has meant a constriction of opportunity not only for men but more importantly for lower-caste women who earlier had the facility to marry in castes above them. The difficulties likely to be experienced in arranging marriages not only for the children of such alliances but also for other members of the family (not noticeable earlier), are freely and frequently voiced.

ASSERTION OF POWER

However, as seen above it is not as if these norms are not broken or imposition of restrictions not challenged. But any open dissent with, or complicit or implicit sanction or acceptance of this stand, or even the inability or non-inclination to punish those who break this norm, is not easy to live down.[...]

In fact, when the parents are unwilling to act in such cases, the caste *biradari* steps in as in the case of Mehrana, where the jat panchayat took the decision. The caste panchayats are indeed intervening frequently to impose a 'justice' according to their own definition. Although very little is known about the working of caste panchayats they remain an active force in rural north India. They are generally known to award minor punishments which humiliate more than injure. Punishments, for example, range from fines, orders to give obligatory village feasts, rubbing one's nose in the dust before the aggrieved party or even the entire gathering or touching their feet, shaving of head, drinking or dipping one's nose in the urine of one or more persons.

The more recent exhibition of power like public stripping and awarding death penalty and executions by the panchayat is closely linked with the growing unhampered urbanisation and consumerism. There has been a steady progress of urbanisation in Haryana, within 20 years, i.e.

between 1961-81, the total number of towns in Haryana has increased from 61 to 81. During this time the urban index of growth of the urban population has more than doubled. Yet, despite extensive urbanisation, the distinction between urban and rural is not watertight. There is a massive overlapping of the two. For example, it is estimated that more than 1,00,000 people from inside the rural and semi-urban areas of Haryana commute daily to Delhi. There are trains from Rohtak, Gurgaon, Palwal and Panipat scheduled to leave in the morning and return in the evening, keeping to the work schedule of the Haryanavi workers employed in various capacities in the metropolis. These trains are not only full to the capacity but are overflowing. There are also a very large number of army recruits or the so-called Other Ranks as well as police personnel all drawn from rural areas who have to leave their families behind in the villages because very few are provided with family accommodation.

This kind of urbanisation is accompanied with spillover of urban consumerist culture. The role model is set by the rural affluent and their conspicuous consumption emulated by others. Their ideology signified by 'a jeep, a gun and a bottle of rum', in keeping with the image of a virile martial race with macho culture is essentially male-oriented. There is no place for women in the 'modern', urban ethos which is imitated. Paradoxically, despite imitating lifestyle and consumerist culture of the cities, the suspicion of the urban value system, culture and influence not only remains but is reinforced in rural areas especially in relation to women. So on the one hand the reigning ideology sanctions and even desires urbanisation and consumerism associated with male status considerations and upward mobility, on the other hand it holds them responsible for fast-changing 'idealised' cultural norms of rural north India. This contradiction is not unoften resolved through violence at an

individual/family level, and/or if that fails to materialise, at a collective community level.

The caste panchayats, in other words seek to protect the fast eroding 'traditional value system' as perceived to be enshrined in customary practices which the law of the land fails to do. For example, except for certain incest taboos the legal restrictions on marriage under the Hindu Marriage Act, 1955 are almost non-existent,¹ whereas in rural areas, apart from several restrictions in marriages, even the category of 'incest' is very wide.² Yet, even here the enforcement of the caste panchayats remains selective. For example, in enforcing the incest taboos, the well-known liaisons within the family, as mentioned above, between different categories of close relations are never taken up by the caste panchayats.

Consequently, incest, whether intra-family or intra-gotra, never meets with similar violence even when made public. Similarly, the sexual codes are sought to be enforced only in relation to upper-caste women. The purity of lower-caste women, even when breached through rape, is not taken cognisance of.

This intervention of the caste panchayats is also an assertion of united power, domination and dictates of the upper-caste senior male members over younger men and women. In a way it is a direct attempt at retention of power by caste leadership which is being fast eroded upon and challenged by aspirants from different socio-economic strata as well as from the younger generation. The new legal system based upon different principles has eroded into their power base. The colonial masters on the other hand had nurtured the power of the caste leadership and helped them to maintain and strengthen it. Their concept of justice gave recognition to the customary law or the ancient texts and implemented it selectively in the courts. For example, in the colonial days a run-away match of an

unmarried girl had not been given legal sanction of a valid marriage because the 'consent' of the guardian had not been forthcoming. The colonial official attitude was moulded on the local custom under which minor or adult females were always under the guardianship of some male member. Legally, the situation is vastly changed now; males and females above 18 years of age are adults and free to act independently without the sanction of a guardian. Yet, in many ways the caste leadership and the caste panchayats are ignoring the legal intervention.

The ideology of female guardianship is essentially an ideology of control. It is closely tied up with the question of control of female sexuality especially in relation to women of upper-caste groups. In the high caste brahmanical social order this control is intrinsically connected not only to the patrilineal succession but also to the maintenance of caste purity and caste hierarchy. Consequently, miscegenation (mixing of castes) as well as hypogamy (union between women of a higher caste and men of lower caste), were severely condemned and inflicted with highest punishment. In Punjab-Haryana, the brahmanical model was not so strong and the concept of caste purity and caste hierarchy were not the same. Yet, caste endogamy marriages were sought to affirm and maintain caste status. Consequently, even though the rules of caste purity were breached by men from agriculturist castes (mostly in their secondary association), women were never allowed to break the caste rules. Men (like the jat cited above) are like the ocean—they engulf women and determine their status.[...]

The persisting low female ratio to male has greatly contributed towards keeping the pressure on women to maintain caste endogamy. For example, the remarriage of a widow remains essentially a levirate alliance, even forcible, if need be. Only recently, widows are allowed to remarry outside the conjugal family, but still very much within the caste. It is only among the lower-caste groups that greater

flexibility is observed for women, whether divorced or widowed. There are instances of widows being sold off among lower castes in western UP. In fact, there is so much of premium on a woman's productive and reproductive potential that it is not allowed to go waste. Among the lower castes and classes, for instance, a widow or a divorcee, especially if she is in her reproductive age category, cannot refuse to remarry.

CONTROLLING FEMALE SEXUALITY: VESTED INTERESTS

The question of control of women's reproductive and productive labour is therefore intrinsically linked up with the control of her sexuality. The decision for its bestowal is crucial to patriarchal considerations of status as well as control and authority. For instance, bestowal of a daughter in marriage is certainly financially draining due to the escalating consumerist premium on dowry, yet, the forging of appropriate endogamous marital links is closely linked with status considerations and status formation. Any break in this, however minor, is very threatening. Selection of a life partner by a female shows her independence in asserting her sexuality and her preference in relation to sexual partnership; in bestowing her reproductive and labour potential on the basis of her own choice. Similarly, such an action among males shows an independence which in the local perception presages a disruption of family ties or breakup of the joint family system. It also shows a loss of authority suffered not only by senior males but also females on the son and more pronouncedly on the *bahu* (daughter-in-law). This factor becomes an important consideration behind the complicity of senior females in opposing any such move. In a situation where settling of a marriage alliance is in the hands of senior males and senior females only, this assertion also deals a severe blow at the family

hierarchy and disrupts its power equation inside the family and disturbs the social hierarchy outside in the village which will not brook its demolition at any cost.

This power equation and play has come to be intimately connected with post-independent changes in India which have created a legal enablement for a female to inherit her parental property. The Hindu Succession Act of 1956 enabled for the first time, daughter, sister, widow and mother to inherit land with full proprietary rights to its disposal. This introduced fundamental and radical changes in the law, breaking from the past. The land of the village is taken to belong to the male descendants of ancestors who originally settled and worked on it, the male agnatic descendants, as members of localised clan alone are considered to have reversionary rights in the estate. Land is ordinarily not to be alienated outside this group. The only ideal and *izzatwala* (honourable) pattern of inheritance is acknowledged to be by males from males. This means basically that daughters and sisters who are potential introducers of fresh blood and new descent lines through their husbands are to be kept from exercising their inheritance rights. With the result that the most virulent objection to the breach of caste/community taboos in marriage comes from the powerful landowning classes of the village. This has introduced anxieties stemming from different reasons not necessarily out of concern of caste endogamy or village exogamy, even though these anxieties are played through these concerns and in fact reinforce them. The resultant violent opposition to self-assertion in marriage therefore overrides any education or modernising process that the rural families may have undergone. In fact, this opposition is almost always based upon the grounds of tradition and culture vs modernism. Significantly, cultural ideas not unoften operate to benefit social groups that construct or promote them. A great deal of this reaction

can be traced to the insecurity in property matters which has increased greatly in the wake of this enabling Act.

Rural patriarchal forces therefore have been anxiously devising means to stem the progressive fallout of this Act through a variety of means. An important way has been to pose the inheritance right of a daughter and a sister to be against that of the brother. Except in cases where there are no brothers, the sisters either sign away their inheritance in favour of their brother or sell it to him at a nominal price. This is a code of conduct which both the natal and conjugal families observe knowingly. For this, the brother-sister bonds of love have also been greatly encouraged as seen in the noticeable revival of *Raksha Bandhan* festival and the renewed sanctity it has claimed in north India.

This emphasis on sanctity of the sister-brother bond is broken in case she makes an alliance within the village as theoretically all are related in a village. Such a decision introduces a rank outsider into the family who can and may claim the property on behalf of his wife. As an outsider he remains outside the influence of the family and caste/community rules and ethics which ensure patrilineal inheritance. Location of a married daughter within the natal village also spells danger to patrilineal inheritance as it facilitates and could lead to assumption of land inherited by her. Thus, tightening of restrictions on marriage practices emphasising village exogamy and caste endogamy has the effect of negating the progressive fallout of the inheritance enablement law on the female population.

The significance of this practice can be easily visualised if it is juxtaposed to the custom prevalent among the lower castes. These castes allow flexibility in the rule of patrilocality. In other words, since the land and its ownership is not in question, the family of a married daughter might settle in her natal village. With the result that the *ghar jamai* (resident son-in-law) phenomenon

among lower castes is not uncommon in rural Haryana or across the border in western UP. Yet, at the time of marriage, the principle of village exogamy is as rigorously enforced as the prohibited degree of 'got' and other taboos by the lower-caste groups. In fact any breach in it is considered 'incest' and violently dealt with. Clearly, there are similarities as well as differences between higher-caste and lower-caste groups in observing caste and sexual codes. This complex picture confirms the sociologists' readings of the contemporary flux of the caste system in India which shows confirmation and challenges co-existing, with class and lifestyles assuming importance in social relations. In fact, it is the class and gender component within the caste system which has created inter-caste and intra-caste differentiation and inequalities as well as status distinctions. Yet, this aspect remains comparatively neglected and needs to be further and more extensively probed. This interface of caste, class and gender, as this analysis shows, is crucial to understanding the complexities of the caste system as it exists today. The overarching link to these complexities is provided by the patriarchal ideology which is more spread across caste and class groups than commonly believed or accepted.

PERIYAR, WOMEN AND
AN ETHIC OF CITIZENSHIP*

V. GEETHA

I look here at aspects of the Self-Respect Movement, a radical anti-caste movement, begun by E. V. Ramasamy Periyar in 1925, and which convulsed the Tamil country into eruptions of defiance, anger and subversion for the next two decades. Later, Periyar's movement suffered several mutations. The Dravidar Kazhagam (DK) was formed in 1944 by Periyar himself, and the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) in 1949, by a group of men who were dissatisfied with the DK. Both organisations continue to be vocal and active in Tamil politics today. However, it seems to me that in different ways, both have compromised and even reneged on the founding ideals of the Self-Respect Movement. This is so, particularly, with reference to the women's question, the resolution of which was quite central to the self-respecters' anti-caste agenda. While some formal victories have been secured such as the legalisation of self-respect marriages which de-sacralised marriage and re-defined it as a contract for living together and the securing of women's rights to property in law—both of which were made into law when the DMK was in power previously—there have been no other substantial achievements. The DK continues to affirm the importance of securing women's rights and liberation as part of its 'consciousness raising' politics, but its gestures in this matter have proved more formal than substantive, more a repetition of time-worn ideas rather than imaginative interventions in the debates and struggles currently being

carried out by women's groups. There are individuals, in and out of the party, who continue to affiliate themselves with Periyar's ideas on gender and work around rights issues, but the DK as an organisation plods along a well-rehearsed path.[...]

WOMEN, CASTE AND SELF-RESPECT

Imprecations against caste and its attendant horrors were often the subject of many a woman self-respecter's addresses to conferences, as well as the articles several of them wrote for one or the other of the Self-Respect Movement's journals, *Kudi Arasu*, *Puratchi*, *Pagutharivu* and *Samodharmam*. Women understood caste as not merely a division of labour and labourers but as a system which divided women as well. Such a division secured for some women relative comfort and security, but also bound them to ignorance. So much so that these women persisted in thinking that they were better off than their lower caste, working-class sisters. Women self-respecters were particularly critical of nationalist women in this regard and took great exception to their entreaties to women to abide by tradition and serve their nation. Commenting on a meeting of 'Indian Women' held in Madras, under the auspices of the Congress, a *Kudi Arasu* editorial wondered, mirroring, as it were, the ideas of women self-respecters, how educated, upper-caste women could forget the fact of their subordinate existence and seek to perpetrate it by invoking conventional role models, such as Sita, Nalayani, Chandramathi and Vasugi; women, whose husband-worship can hardly be considered worthy of emulation (*Kudi Arasu* 22 January 1933).[...]

Of lower-caste women, it was said that their lot was toil. In a remarkable article titled, 'Women and Work', Neelavathi, a prominent speaker and writer in the Self-Respect Movement observed that if one were to leave aside

the very rich and privileged amongst women, who lolled about all day long and idled their time away, the others worked—not merely at housework, but in ‘factories, hospitals, in the country side ... (in) tailoring, weaving, construction, vending....’ Women, argued Neelavathi, were however denied the dignity of being workers, since society held that work was the mark of a man. Thus, whatever women laboured at became theirs by destiny. For Neelavathi, it was important for women as well as society to acknowledge their productive worth. Her plea that all women, except the idle few, be considered workers and accorded respect—and due wages, even for housework—represents a skilful deployment of Periyar’s argument that all non-Brahmins or Shudras ought to be considered workers by birth, since they were denied free and unrestricted access to all but the most menial of tasks in caste society (*Puratchi* 29 April 1934).

Periyar had noted; ‘Just as brahminism condemns a very large portion of the working population to shudrahood, so it has condemned women to the servitude of marriage’ (Anaimuthu 1974: 178). Neelavathi seeks to establish a homology between women condemned to housework and childbearing and yet denied the status of labourers, and shudras condemned to their caste status (and labour) and denied the identity of productive workers.

What is important to note here is that while women ... reminded their nationalist peers to be attentive to questions of caste difference and consider the problems faced by *devadasis* and Adi Dravida women as equally pertinent to the national struggle, as, say the boycott of liquor shops, socialist-minded women like Neelavathi sought to remind all women of their common fate as workers in the family. The self-respecters acknowledged the fact that caste divided women and prevented them from coming to terms with all those common modes of oppression to which they were subject under patriarchy.

Yet, they also knew that this divide cannot simply be wished away and that women had to consciously work at coming together, rather than assuming that they could, simply because they were sisters together in the nationalist struggle.

Women self-respecters resisted caste in other ways as well; by endorsing adi dravida rights—to temple entry, to a separate electorate, to learning; by supporting the demand for communal representation—for all non-brahmins in government and education—and by opposing and criticising the ideology of nationalism, as exemplified by Gandhi.[...] Neelavathi met with Gandhi during his visit to the Tamil country in 1934 and interrogated his faith in *vamadharmā*, his views on the abolition of untouchability and the place he reserved for religion in public life (*Puratchi*, 18 February 1934).

It must be said here that many adi dravida women were active in the Self-Respect Movement. The most famous and visible amongst them was Anapoorani, an extremely well-read, articulate and daring woman who spoke out on a variety of matters, including atheism, the repression of caste and the rights of women. She married A. Rathinasabapathy, an upper-caste non-brahmin, and a socialist by conviction. Their marriage was considered by the Self-Respect Movement to be a major victory over caste and orthodoxy. Rathinasabapathy was also in the forefront of the struggle against the subordination of women and wrote a fascinating novella titled *Yezhai Azhutha Kaneer* (The Tears of the Poor) (1932), which described a sort of dystopia, where men were punished for their sins towards women in the real world and cast into perdition and eternal suffering.

Perhaps the one significant practical act which enabled women self-respecters to speak out boldly against caste, nationalism and patriarchy was the self-respect marriage. Largely inter-caste, or an instance of a widow marriage,

and deliberately secular, dispensing, as it did, with the services of the Brahmin priest, the self-respect marriage form announced to the world at large the arrival of a new sort of family; trans-caste and existing as the germ, the primary constituent of a new, equal community. By rendering marriage a matter of individual choice and desire, as well as a social contract, the self-respect marriage form made the caste Hindu family appear suddenly vulnerable. With women deemed free to marry whomsoever they wished to, the integrity of caste too stood challenged, since caste identity, centred in the woman's body and consecrated through strategies of control and discipline, could now be exchanged for one that the woman wished to create for herself—in freedom, in self-respect and on the basis of a chosen reciprocity.

WOMEN SELF-RESPECTERS AND THEIR CLAIMS ON REASON

For women who thus opposed caste, their new sense of self came to hinge on two aspects of consciousness: Reason and mutuality. Reason was interpreted by women to mean an aspect of a probing, curious and active intelligence and one which would enable them to unravel the meaning of all those rituals, customs and everyday practices which bound them to a life of unknowing and domestic servitude. Reason was to enable them to question themselves and reflect on the choices they made, even if these happened to be merely quotidian ones.[...] Women were now ready to claim the powers of reasoning for themselves and were ready to examine not only literary opinions and reflections on women, but also inquire into those ill-opinions men held of women (*Puratchi*, 26 November 1933), D. Rangammal writing in *Puratchi* drew attention to the wastefulness of religious festivals, of the debauchery which accompanied them and of the plight of young women in pilgrimage

towns, especially during festival times, when they were teased and near molested by feckless and rude young men (*Puratchi*, 28 January 1934).

Such questionings of religion and faith—and these may be found in all self-respect magazines—were enabled and inspired by the Self-Respect Movement's general recklessness and courage with respect to matters of faith. Self-respecters were critical of all religions and refused to accept that religion and faith could help constitute a viable identity and community. For strategic reasons, and in particular contexts, as when Gandhi and Congress insisted that adi dravidas were also Hindus, Periyar exhorted the lower castes to convert to Islam and secure their freedom and self-respect in a general Islamic brotherhood. But this was no general policy and at other times, Islam was as much criticised by the self-respecters as other religions. The practice of *purdah*, for instance, came in for a sustained critique and significantly enough, Islam's definitions of female identity and freedom were debated vigorously by several Muslims. For example, Aa Mu Mohammed Qasim Bhakavi wrote a long article *in Puratchi* titled 'Contraception and the Prophet' (*Puratchi*, 24 December 1933), Al-Haj Subahu Mo wrote an impassioned piece titled; 'Why Did Women Become Slaves? Muslim Women are also Slaves' (*Puratchi*, 28 January 1933). M. K. M. Khader wrote on how it was absolutely essential that women be liberated, if a socialist republic was to be established (*Puratchi*, 15 April 1934).

Such reasoned denunciations of religion helped constitute religious ideas and practices as legitimate objects of analysis by not merely civil society, but also the state. In fact, the trajectory of the self-respecters' critique of religion traced a curve which leads them inevitably, as it were, to demand that the state intervene in matters of religious custom, when these proved demeaning to women. In such instances, the state appeared to the self-respecters

as embodying an intelligence and a rationality, clearly different from and superior to the logic which informed religious rituals and practices. The self-respecters' support for the devadasi abolition bill is of particular interest in this respect.

The self-respecters objected to the devadasi system for several interlinked reasons. For one, it seemed a deplorable instance of debauchery sanctified by the priest and the temple and rendered hoary by convention. Besides, the fact that devadasis were all inevitably from non-brahmin castes and that they were consecrated as temple dancers, in service, not merely to the diety, but to the deity's patrons, be they brahmin priests or men of wealth, irked women (as well as men) self-respecters. Then, again, the system presented itself as a desirable vocation, so much so that women who felt 'dedicated' into it did not really seem to understand the vicious logic which held them captive. For women self-respecters, religion, caste and the claims of masculine sexuality seemed to exist in a complex and unholy articulation in the figure of the devadasi. Periyar himself held similar views and articulated them quite forcefully (Anaimuthu 1974: 170-73).[...]

It was because they sensed the problematic nature of desire, rights and freedom, as these were understood and experienced by the devadasi, that self-respecters were convinced the rights of the devadasi cannot be thought through clearly within the confines of a system, which seemed to grant them sexual autonomy but which restricted them to the service of the powerful and wealthy. Thus, they wished to do away with the system altogether and constitute these rights in a different context. This context was to be framed by the punitive powers of the state, which, as Periyar made clear, ought to be used to cleanse the body politic of social diseases, as well as by their vision of a new civil and social order (Anaimuthu 1974: 173-76). In other words, the law was to guarantee

and enforce rights which were to be grounded in everyday practices, in those new structures of feeling, the self-respecters looked to create and re-create.

For self-respecters, it must be pointed out here, reason and desire did not exist as polar elements in consciousness. Periyar wrote at length on how love and desire cannot be authenticated, except as aspects of well-thought out, reasoned choices. Otherwise, love seemed to him capricious, mere tomfoolery, an infatuation of the moment (ibid.: 180-84). While he conceded that to desire is human and therefore, a crucial aspect of existence, and that there are no limits to freedom, autonomy and self-fulfilment, except those we set for ourselves, he held that in a social context, desire had to heed to norms of reciprocity and mutuality. Social restrictions and codes which forbade young widows from marrying again clearly went against the strictures of mutuality, for these codes allowed men to be polygamous even as they imposed celibacy on women (ibid.: 134-39). Likewise, social and religious norms which forbade a man and woman from dissolving their marriage were either of them unhappy, represented a travesty of the ideal of reciprocity which, as Periyar argued, ought to animate and ground conjugal faith (ibid.: 146).

In matters such as those discussed above, we find Periyar and his self-respecters aligning the claims of desire to notions of freedom on one hand and to the arguments of reason on the other. Elsewhere, as with his criticisms of the ideal of female chastity, we find Periyar arguing against a sexual ethic which sanctioned and legitimised male promiscuity, while reproving of and rendering illegitimate female desire. Marriage seemed to Periyar and others to capture best the sexual unfreedom thrust on women in the course of history, and in order to counter this state of existence, Periyar exhorted women to give into the claims of a free, self-validating desire, take on lovers, choose a life of economic self-sufficiency and abjure the responsibilities

of motherhood (ibid.: 184-88). Here, of course, desire assumes relevance as a counter-ideal, an imperative in itself. Yet, in this instance as well, it is the rational, directing intelligence, committed to rendering transparent a gross injustice, that propels desire. Freedom and the love of freedom were for Periyar always already rational choices, in that they can be defined and understood and not merely felt and experienced. By the same token, desire, as an adjunct of reason requires and is authenticated only by rational self-expression.

WOMEN AND THE COMMUNITY OF SELF-RESPECT

Fighting caste and reasoning against faith, women self-respecters viewed themselves as the citizens of the future, as harbingers of the millennium. This millennial urge informed the movement's perceptions of itself to a great degree. Periyar and others often proclaimed themselves as revolutionaries who not only wished to stand caste society on its head, but who were doing so, in the knowledge that no one or no movement, since the time of the Buddha had attempted such a thing. For women, this millennial imagery translated itself as an invitation to citizenship, to a community of comrades. Even the self-respect marriage vow echoed the spirit of comradeship the self-respecters wished to consecrate:

Today our conjugal life that is based on love begins. From today I accept you, my dear and beloved comrade as my spouse, so that I may consecrate my love and co-operation for the cause of social progress, in such a manner as would not contradict your desires. (*Kudi Arasu* 1974: 11 May 1929)

As we had remarked earlier, marriage interpreted in the self-respect fashion, ceased to mark the limits to domesticity, family and community and, in fact, enabled women (and men) to orient their life to ideas, to the world outside. As the life of Kunjitham and Gurusamy, as of several others, indicate self-respecters defined their lives in terms of the world, rather than the self and family. Working as full-time propagandists and movement builders, who did not mind travel, dislocations of home and career, and yet bearing and raising children—with the active support of their spouses, women self-respecters led a life, where neither conjugality nor motherhood exerted a dominant and determinate influence. Periyar's—and the movement's—endorsement of women's reproductive choice played no mean role in freeing women from the bind of motherhood, both as a set of practices and ideology. While the freedom from actual child-rearing routines may have proved more illusive than real, except in rare instances, the mental and imaginative freedom which women experienced, thinking beyond motherhood, was experienced as very real by women. This freedom implied that women could talk, think and act on ideas that were far removed from the sphere of everyday life: they could debate politics, philosophy, faith, in fact, any and everything. This freedom also implied that women could look on their bodies as their own, as part of their being, so to speak. They could resist reification, either into chaste wives or devoted mothers and could think of themselves as sportswomen, adventurers, workers and thinkers. As a *Kudi Arasu* editorial noted, women needed new role models in place of old ones: rather than self-sacrificing *pativratas*, they needed to be like women of these modern times who had made a name for themselves in science, in education, in sports and in other feats of endurance (*Kudi Arasu* 1974: 22 January 1933).

Free to remake themselves in whatever manner they desired and tied to men in their lives through ties of

mutuality, women acquired a new identity: that of the citizen, the woman of civic virtue, and one who could claim and act on an identity which did not subordinate her to men, nor define her as essentially different from them. While Periyar sometimes argued that women's reproductive functions restricted them from laying claim to complete autonomy in the present scheme of things (*Kudi Arasu*, 12 August 1928), he also insisted that motherhood could be rejected, in fact, ought to be disowned by women themselves, in favour of parenthood. As he observed, 'We maintain that while it is the case that women possess the attribute of bearing a child in their wombs for 10 months and eventually giving birth to it, this, in itself, does not make them different from men with respect to qualities such as anger, ruling power and strength'. Likewise, we think that though men do not possess the [biological] means to get pregnant, it cannot be said they possess qualities different from women, in respect of calm, love and the power of nurture. If we are to value true equality—if there exists true love between man and woman—it is certain that all responsibilities except that of bearing a child should be considered common to both (Anaimuthu 1974: 121). Convinced of women's rights to all that men had access to and claims on, and wanting to create social institutions which would enable women share, or even lay aside the burden of motherhood, Girija Devi, a self-respecter and fiction writer, wondered if there should not be a special government department which would initiate such action, as would ensure the progress of women in all fields. Such a department, she reasoned, ought to be staffed only with women, who, initially could be nominated to office, but who would gradually be elected to their posts by an all-woman electorate. This department was to undertake practical tasks, of educating women, providing them with opportunities for earning their living, and most

importantly, it was to aid and assist in matters of pregnancy and child birth (*Kudi Arasu*, 10 January 1932).

The notion of citizenship, as it was adumbrated and defined by self-respecters, for both men and women, was a complex one: it did not merely call for a legal identity, though this was implicit in the movement's struggle for the civil rights of women, adi dravidas and others who were denied rights to a self-respecting existence. The Self-Respect Movement conceived of citizenship as the founding ideal of a new republic. It was to animate not merely claims made on the state, but on society as well; it implied and called forth a social commitment to the destruction of caste, wily faith and gender differences. Citizenship in this sense was to define new modalities of personal and social interaction, where self-respect and mutuality governed human relationships. It was to be expressive of new structures of feeling which implicated men and women in forms of communication that allowed for a felicitous and complex interplay between reason, emotion, desire, freedom on one hand and which established comradeship in love, as in politics, as the basis of the new community, on the other.

What was to be the relationship of citizenship to the economy? While self-respecters did deploy caste as a category of, what we would call, political economy, drawing attention to the manner in which one's caste status mediated one's access to work, education and social status, they did not think that economic exploitation stood to compromise a person's self-respect and rights, as much as did the oppressive power of caste. Besides, they defined the terms of power in caste society such that they could point out how the division which exists in this society, between those who carry out intellectual labour, and those who work with their hands, produce a surplus which is translated, not merely into material terms, but into symbolic and ritual terms as well.

Knowledge, claimed and possessed exclusively by certain castes, was to them as much a mark of exploitative social relationships, as were relationships of production. As far as women were concerned, they were as condemned in this system as the adi dravidas—into slavery and ignorance. As S. Ramanathan, a leading self-respecter, observed:

... because our forefathers held women as property, they had to create the phenomenon of untouchability to safeguard this property. (*Kudi Arasu*, 12 April 1931).

CITIZENSHIP AND UTOPIA

In many ways, the Self-Respect Movement bears comparison with the women's movement. Like the self-respecters, feminists address consciousness, as much as they do structure and attempt constantly to work out the relationship between the two, unwilling as they are to make the transformation of the one contingent on the transformation of the other. Feminist struggles in the interlinked realms of identity, community and comradeship, likewise, demand substantive changes in the content of human relationships, even as they seek formal guarantees for these changes in law. And, like the self-respecters, feminists seek to root changes, whether in structure or consciousness, in the everyday: in modes of address, attire, use of language, in forms of communication and in practices of everyday living. Just as how Periyar attempted to construct a non-brahmin historic bloc that could claim a shared and common identity in notions of self-respect and mutuality, so do feminists struggle to retain gender as a valid category for the coming together of women of different political persuasions and ideas. In both instances, the attempts have required an enormous amount of energy and imagination.

Given this homological relationship between two movements which were concerned with re-making the

human subject of history, and given the fact that both have allowed themselves a great degree of political latitude in working out a politics of the possible, it seems important that we import lessons from the one into the other. In this context, I wish to look briefly at the debates which have grown around the demand, from various feminist and anti-feminist quarters, for a 'uniform' civil code. These debates bear a striking resemblance to those exchanges of 60 to 70 years ago and offer, on that account, a discursive and political context into which I wish to insert the legacy of the Self-Respect Movement. It seems to me that the movement possessed a notion of rights, claims and citizenship which was sensitive to differences, arising out of culture and community. Yet, it chose to understand these differences of caste and religion, in the context of a complex social system which deployed power and authority in ingenious ways to string them together in an unequal hierarchical social order. Thus, it came to re-make society and re-deploy power in more democratic and dialogic ways and in doing so instructed a vision of gender justice which allowed women to dream of Utopia. I am concerned here with feminist debates on the 'uniform' or, as some feminists term it, a 'gender-just' civil code, which are interesting, embattled and even acrimonious.

Those who are hesitant in urging forth that the state work towards the making of such a code, point out that given the communalisation of our polity, and the fact that communal parties are also insisting the state legislate such a code into existence, feminist demands will eventually be co-opted into a communal agenda. Besides, if such a code were to actually be drawn up, it may serve to strengthen the intrusive powers of the state and render it more impervious to democratic demands and pressures. As it stands today, the law is not really effective or useful in solving problems relating to women's lives, and to demand a new piece of legislation may help to naturalise the fiction, that changes

in the law actually help to transform women's lives. Also, in a country whose peoples follow a bewildering array of customs, can one really and adequately define the nature, content and meaning of 'gender justice'; especially since, gender as a category exists and is in fact constructed only in articulation with a host of other social divisions and practices, such as those of class, caste and ethnicity. Proponents of this point of view argue that the more viable thing would be to suggest and ask for reform of personal and community laws.

Those who argue for a gender-just code point out that such a code will not really serve the purpose of communalists, since it will start out on premises which are essentially different from those which inform the communalist argument. For instance, they point to an existing draft (prepared by Forum against Oppression of Women, Mumbai) and indicate that it not only re-defines marriage as a contract but also interprets the terms of conjugality completely differently. It is also argued that feminists who speak out in favour of a gender-just code are no more convinced of the efficacy of the law, as those who oppose it. But the demand for such a legislation is at least a step towards making the state a little more accountable to the plight of women living under different personal laws and suffering the discrimination and injustice all of them encode and practice. Besides, one may think of such legislation in terms of particular sorts of issues, such as to do with maintenance, guardianship and the right to freedom from domestic violence, rather than in terms of the proposed legislation's effect on community laws.

It is clear the second set of arguments is similar to those advanced by the self-respecters. They take as their starting point female subjectivity as they imagine it ought to exist, and speak in the name of a free, autonomous and desiring subject, who is already disengaged from community and caste ties. Like the self-respecters, they locate their

arguments in the future, in a Utopia—the existing draft for a gender-just code is Utopian—and consider the present as a phase which ought to be subjected to continual social criticism and critical action, so that the guarantees sought for in law may enable transformations in civil society as well, Just as how the self-respecters' demands for interventionist legislation in the cause of the adi dravidas and women take meaning only in the context of their attempts to find and ground new structures of feeling in everyday life, so do these demands for a gender-just code make sense only in the context of an evolving, Utopian feminist project. The point is the experiences of the Self-Respect Movement help in theorising the position of those feminists who are critical of and who do not wish to ground identity in family and community, and who look to a comradeship to root a new and radical female subjectivity. They seem to suggest that a politics of identity need not always work from within already existing subaltern positions. It can also pitch its arguments in the future and in the present which is an anticipation of that future.[...]

DALIT WOMEN TALK DIFFERENTLY

*A Critique of 'Difference' and Towards
a Dalit Feminist Standpoint Position**

SHARMILA REGE

The 1980s were marked by the newly exploding caste identity and consciousness and theoretical, and political issues involved in the debate on caste and its role in social transformation came to be debated (Kothari 1994). The early 1990s saw the assertion of autonomous Dalit women's organisations at both regional and national levels. Such an assertion had thrown up several crucial theoretical and political challenges, besides underlining the brahmanism of the feminist movement and the patriarchal practices of Dalit politics. The formation of autonomous Dalit women's organisations initially propelled a serious debate drawing responses from both Left party-based as well as autonomous women's organisations. However, the debates seemed to have come to rest and the relative silence, and the apparent absence of a revisioning of feminist politics thereafter only suggests an ideological position of multiple/plural feminist standpoints. That is to say, the separate assertion by Dalit women's organisations comes to be accepted as one more standpoint within such a framework of 'difference'; issues of caste become the sole responsibility of the Dalit women's organisations. An absence of an exploration of each other's positions—hinders the dialectics; both of a revisioning of contemporary feminist politics and a sharpening of the positions put forth by autonomous Dalit women's

organisations. This essay seeks to open some of these issues for debate.[...]

MASCULINISATION OF DALITHOOD AND SAVARNISATION OF WOMANHOOD

The new social movements of the 1970s and the early 1980s saw the emergence of several organisations and fronts such as the Shramik Mukti Sanghatana, Satyashodhak Communist Party, Shramik Mukti Dal, Yuvak Kranti Dal—none of whom limited the Dalit women to a token inclusion; their revolutionary agenda, in different ways accorded them a central place. This, however, is not the case with the other two movements of the period—the Dalit Panther and the women's movement; as constituted mainly by the Left party-based women's fronts and the then emergent autonomous women's groups. The Dalit Panthers made a significant contribution to the cultural revolt of the 1970s—but in both their writings and their programme—the Dalit women remained encapsulated firmly in the roles of the 'mother' and the 'victimised sexual being'.

The Left party-based women's organisations made a significant contribution towards economic and work-related issues as the autonomous women's groups politicised and made public the issue of violence against women. Serious debates on class v/s patriarchies emerged, both parties, however, did not address the issues of brahmanism. While for the former 'caste' was contained in class, for the latter the notion of sisterhood was pivotal. All women came to be conceived as 'victims' and therefore 'Dalit'; so that what results is a classical exclusion. All 'Dalits' are assumed to be males and all women 'savama.' It may be argued that the categories of experience and personal politics were at the core of the epistemology and politics of the Dalit Panther movement and the women's movement. Such a position resulted into a universalisation of what was in

reality the middle class, upper caste women's experience or the Dalit male experience.

The autonomous women's groups of the early 1980s had remained largely dependent on the left frame even as they emerged as a challenge to it (Omvedt 1993). With the women's movement gathering momentum—sharp critiques of mainstream conceptualisations of work, development, legal process and the state emerged and this led to several theoretical and praxiological reformulations. Debates on class v/s patriarchy, were politically enriching for both the parties to the debate. It must be underlined here that most of the feminist groups broadly agreed that in the Indian context, a materialistic framework was imperative to the analysis of women's oppression. However, in keeping with their roots in the 'class' framework, there were efforts to draw commonalities across class and to a lesser extent castes or communities (ibid.). This is apparent in the major campaigns launched by the women's movement during this period. The absence of an analytical frame that in the tradition of Phule and Ambedkar would view caste hierarchies and patriarchies as intrinsically linked is apparent in the anti-dowry, anti-rape and anti-violence struggles of the women's movement.

An analysis of the practices of violence against women by caste would reveal that while the incidence of dowry deaths and violent controls and regulations on the mobility and sexuality by the family are frequent among the dominant upper castes, Dalit women are more likely to face the collective and public threat of rape, sexual assault and physical violence at the work place and in public (Rege 1994). Consider for e.g., the statements issued by women's organisations during the Mathura rape case. While the NFIW looked at rape in 'class' terms the socialist women in terms of 'glass vessel cracking' and therefore in terms of loss of honour; the AIWC sought psychological explanations of the autonomous women's groups highlighted the use of

patrtriarchial power (Akerkar 1995; Kumar 1995). Looking back at the agitation, it is apparent that the sexual assaults on Dalit women in Marathwada during the 'Namaantar' agitation do not become a nodal point for such an agitation, in fact they come to be excluded. The campaign, therefore, becomes more of a single issue campaign. Consider also the campaign against dowry, while the left-based women's organisations viewed dowry in terms of the ways in which capitalism was developing in India; the autonomous women's groups focused on the patriarchal power/violence within families (Kumar 1995). The present practices of dowry cannot be outside the processes of brahmanisation and their impact on marriage practices. That brahmanic ideals led to a preference for dowry marriage is well documented. In fact, it is the colonial establishment of the legality of the Brahma form of marriage that institutionalises and expands the dowry system. The brahmanising castes adopted the Brahma form of marriage over the other forms and thereby establishing 'dowry' as an essential ritual (Sheel 1997). Moreover the principle of endogamy and its coercive and violent perpetuation through collective violence against inter-caste alliances are all crucial to the analysis of the dowry question.

The relative absence of caste as a category in the feminist discourse on violence has also led to the encapsulation of the Muslim and Christian women within the questions of 'Talaq' and 'Divorce'. Recent studies by Razia Patel for the Times Foundation and Vilas Sonawane for the Muslim OBC Sanghatana have revealed that encroachment on caste-based occupational practices and issues of education and employment are listed as crucial issues by a majority of the Muslim women.

Thus, in retrospect, it is clear that while the Left party-based women's organisations collapsed caste into class, the autonomous women's groups collapsed caste into sisterhood—both leaving brahmanism unchallenged. The

movement has addressed issues concerning women of the Dalit, tribal and minority communities and substantial gains have been achieved but a feminist politics centring around the women of the most marginalised communities could not emerge. The history of agitations and struggles of the second wave of the women's movement articulated strong anti-patriarchal positions on different issues. Issues of sexuality and sexual politics—which are crucial for a feminist politics remained largely within an individualistic and lifestyle frame. Issues of sexuality are intrinsically linked to caste and addressal of sexual politics without a challenge to brahmanism results in lifestyle feminisms.

In the post-Mandal agitations and caste violence at Chunduru and Pimpri Deshmukh for instance women of the upper castes were involved as feminist subjects assertive non-submissive and protesting against injustice done to them as women (at Chunduru or Pimpri Deshmukh) and as citizens (anti-Mandal). In the anti-Mandal protests, young middle-class women declared that they were against all kinds of reservations (including those for women) and they mourned the death of merit and explicated that they were out to save the nation. Their placards said, 'we want employed husbands'—sexuality and caste became hidden issues as they protested as 'citizens' (Tharu and Niranjana 1994). At Pimpri-Deshmukh in Maharashtra, following the hacking to death of the Dalit kotwal (active mobiliser for the local Buddha Vihar) by upper-caste men, the upper-caste women came out in public complaining that the Dalit man had harassed them and was sexually perverted. They claimed that they had incited their men to protect their honour, thus the agency of upper-caste women was invoked. The issue was not an issue of molestation alone or one of violence against Dalits alone, but one that underlines the complex re-formulations that brahmanical patriarchies undergo in order to counter collective Dalit resistance.

The increasing visibility of Dalit women in power structures as sarpanch or member of the panchayat and in the new knowledge-making processes (such as Bhanwari Devi's intervention through the Saathin programme) has led to increased backlash against Dalit women. The backlash is expressed through a range of humiliating practices and often culminates in rape or hacking to death of their kinsmen. Such incidents underline the need for a dialogue between Dalit and feminist activists, since inter-caste relations at the local level may be mediated through a redefinition of gendered spaces. Kannabiran and Kannabiran (1991) have pointed to how the deadlock between Kshatriya and Dalit men caused by Dalit agricultural labourer women 'dressing well' could be solved only by a decision taken by men of both the communities. It was decided that women of either community would not be allowed to step into each other's locations. The sexual assault on Dalit women has been used as a common practice for undermining the manhood of the caste. Some Dalit male activists did argue that in passing derogatory remarks about upper-caste girls (in incidents such as Chanduru) Dalit men were only getting their own back. The emancipatory agenda of the Dalit and women's movements will have to be sensitive to these issues and underline the complex interphase between caste and gender as structuring hierarchies in society.

The demolition of the Babri Masjid and the series of incidents that followed and women's active participation in the Hindu Right has led the women's movement to backtrack on the demand of the Uniform Civil Code. The right-wing government in Maharashtra has appropriated the crucial issue of indecent representation of women too. The formation of the Agnishikha Maanch with its agenda of regulation of morality and 'working mothers' is a case in point. In the name of saving from the negative impact of the West, the right-wing government has launched public

campaigns against glossies and advertisements and has sought to clean Mumbai by launching a campaign of rounding up prostitutes and segregating those found to be HIV positive. Gender issues are appropriated as cultural issues and become grounds for moral regulation. All this calls for reformulation of our feminist agenda, to reclaim our issues and reconceptualising them such that feminist politics poses a challenge to their very cross-caste/class conceptualisation of brahmanical Hindutva.

Such a re-conceptualisation calls for a critique of brahmanical hierarchies from a gender perspective. Such critiques have the potential of translating the discourse of sexual politics from individual narratives to collective contestations of hierarchies. In the brahmanical social order, caste-based division of labour and sexual divisions of labour are intermeshed such that elevation in caste status is preceded by the withdrawal of women of that caste from productive processes outside the private sphere. Such a linkage derives from presumptions about the accessibility of sexuality of lower-caste women because of their participation in social labour. Brahminism in turn locates this as the failure of lower-caste men to control the sexuality of their women and underlines this as a justification of their impurity. Thus gender ideology legitimises not only structures of patriarchy but also the very organisation of caste (Liddle and Joshi 1986). Similarly, drawing upon Ambedkar's analysis of caste, caste ideology (endogamy) is also the very basis of regulation and organisation of women's sexuality. Hence caste determines the division of labour, sexual division of labour and division of sexual labour (Rege 1995). Hence there exist multiple patriarchies and many of their overlaps and differences are structured (Sangari 1995). Brahmanisation has been a two-way process of acculturation and assimilation and through history there has been a brahmanical refusal to universalise a single patriarchal mode. Thus, the existence

of multiple patriarchies is a result of both brahmanical conspiracy and of the relation of the caste group to the means for production. There are, therefore, according to Sangari (1995), discrete (specific to caste), as well as overlapping patriarchal arrangements. Hence, she argues that women who are sought to be united on the basis of systematic overlapping patriarchies are nevertheless divided on caste, class lines and by their consent to patriarchies and their compensatory structures. If feminists are to challenge these divisions then mode of organisation and struggles 'should encompass all of the social inequalities that patriarchies are related to, embedded in and structured by'. Does the different voice of Dalit women challenge these divisions? In the next section we seek to outline the non-brahmanical renderings of women's liberation in Maharashtra.

NON-BRAHMANICAL RENDERING OF WOMEN'S LIBERATION

In the 1990s, there were several independent and autonomous assertions of Dalit women's identity; a case in point is the formation of the National Federation of Dalit Women and the All-India Dalit Women's Forum. At the state level, the Maharashtra Dalit Mahila Sanghatana was formed in 1995, a year earlier, the women's wing of the Bhartiya Republican Party and the Bahujari Mahila Sangh had organised the Bahujan Mahila Parishad. In a historical happening, in December 1996, at Chandrapur a 'Vikas Vanchit Dalit Mahila Parishad' was organised and a proposal for commemorating 25 December (the day Ambedkar set the *Manusmriti* on flames) as Bharatiya Streemukti Divas was put forth. In 1997, the Christi Mahila Sangharsh Sanghatana, an organisation of Dalit Christian women was founded. These different organisations have put forth varying non-brahmanical ideological positions and

yet have come together on several issues such as the issue of Bharatiya Shreemukti Divas and the issue of reservations for OBC women in parliamentary bodies.

The emergence of autonomous Dalit women's organisation led to a major debate; set rolling by the essay 'Dalit Women Talk Differently' (Guru 1995). A series of discussions around the essay were organised in Pune by different feminist groups. A two-day seminar on the same was organised by Alochana—Centre for Research and Documentation on Women in June 1996. Subsequently, there were two significant responses to the emergence of autonomous Dalit women's organisations; one by Kiran Moghe of the Janwadi Mahila Sanghatana and the other by Vidyut Bhagwat argued out the different issues at stake.

Guru (1995) had argued that to understand the Dalit women's need to talk differently, it was necessary to delineate both internal and external factors that have a bearing on this phenomenon. He locates their need to talk differently in a discourse of descent against the middle-class women's movement by the Dalit men and the moral economy of the peasant movements. It is a note of dissent, he argues, against their exclusion from both the political and cultural arena. It is further underlined that social location determines the perception of reality and therefore representation of Dalit women's issues by non-Dalit women was less valid and less authentic (p. 2549). Though Guru's argument is well taken and we agree that Dalit women must name the difference, to privilege knowledge claims on the basis of direct experience on claims of authenticity may lead to a narrow identity politics. Such a narrow frame may in fact limit the emancipatory potential of the Dalit women's organisations and also their epistemological standpoints.

The Left party-based women's organisations have viewed the emergence of autonomous women's organisations as 'setting up separate health' (Moghe 1996). Moghe argues

that despite the earlier critiques of the Left party-based women's groups made by the autonomous women's groups, the context of Hindutva and the New Economic Policy (NEP) has brought both parties together and the autonomous women's groups had once again come to share a common platform with the left. The subtext of Moghe's arguments is that autonomy is limiting, and that the Dalit women's autonomous organisations faced the threat of being 'autonomous from the masses', in case they did not keep the umbilical relation with the Republican Party. In such a context, the efforts, she argued, would be limited by the focus on the experiences and the intricacies of funding. In a critique of Moghe's position (1995), Bhagwat (1995) argued that the position was lacking in self-reflexivity and that the enriching dialectics between the left parties and the autonomous women's groups had been overlooked in highlighting only one side of the story. To label any new autonomous assertion from the marginalised as identitarian and limited to experience, she argues, was to overlook the history of struggles by groups to name themselves and their politics.

Several apprehensions were raised about the Dalit Mahila Sanghatans' likelihood of being a predominantly neo-Buddhist women's organisation. Pardeshi (1996) rightly argues that such apprehensions are historically insensitive and overlook the historical trajectories of the growth of the Dalit movement in Maharashtra. Yet, she also cautions that a predominantly neo-Buddhist middle-class leadership could have politically limiting consequences, for instance, at many of the proceedings of the Parishad; brahmanisation came to be understood within a narrow frame of non-practice of Trisaran and Panchasheel. Such a frame could limit the participation by women of middle castes.

There are as of today, at least three major contesting and overlapping positions that have emerged from the struggles and politics of Dalit women. One of the earliest and well-

defined position is the Marxist/Phule-Ambedkarite position of the Satyashodak Mahila Sabha. (For more details, see Patil [1994] and the manifesto of the Satyashodhak Communist Party.)

A position emerging out of the Dalit-bahujan alliance is that of the Bahujan Mahila Mahasangh (BMM) which critiques the vedic, brahmanical tradition and seeks to revive the Bahujan tradition of the 'Adimuya'. The secular position is critiqued as brahmanical and individualistic and the Ambedkarite conceptualisation of *Dhamma* in community life is underlined. The common civil codes are opposed and customary law and community-based justice is upheld. Significantly, the BMM seeks to combine both the struggles for political power and a cultural revolution in order to revive and extend the culture of Bahujans (Thakur 1996). Such a position is crucial in order to problematise the dominant brahmanical culture and thereby underline the materiality of culture. Yet, it faces the danger of glorifying Bahujan familial and community practices, any traces of patriarchal power therein are acquitted at once by viewing them as a resultant of the processes of brahmanisation.

The Dalit Mahila Sanghatana has critiqued the persistence of the 'Manuvadi Sanskrit' among the Dalit male who otherwise traces his lineage to a Phule Ambedkarite ideology. The Sanghatana proposes to put forth its manifesto at the centre of which would be the most Dalit of Dalit women (Pawade 1996). The Christi Mahila Sangharsh Sanghatana is a Dalit Christian women's organisation. In the initial meetings the loss of traditional occupations of the converts, their transfer to the service sector, the hierarchies among the Christians by caste and region and the countering of oppositional forces led by the church and state-level Christian organisations came to be debated (Bhakre 1997).

These non-brahmanical renderings of feminist politics have led to some self-reflexivity among the autonomous women's groups and their responses could be broadly categorised as: (a) a non-dialectical position of those who grant that historically it is now important that Dalit women take the leadership but they do not revision a non-brahmanical feminist politics for themselves, (b) the left position that collapses caste into class and continues to question the distinct materiality of caste and who have registered a note of dissent on the declaration of 25 December as Bharatiya Streemukti Divas, (c) a self-reflexive position of those autonomous women's groups who recognise the need to re-formulate and revision feminist politics for the non-brahmanical renderings are viewed as more emancipatory.

To go back to where we began this essay, namely the issue of difference. It is apparent that the issues underlined by the new Dalit women's movement go beyond naming of the 'difference' of Dalit women and calls for a revolutionary epistemological shift to a Dalit feminist standpoint (see Harding 1991).

The intellectual history of feminist standpoint theory may be traced to Marx, Engels and Lukacs insights into the standpoint of the proletariat. A social history of standpoint theory focuses on what happens when marginalised peoples begin to gain public voice. The failure of dominant groups to critically and systematically interrogate their advantaged situation leaves their social situation scientifically and epistemologically a disadvantaged one for generating knowledge (Grant 1993). Such accounts may end up legitimating exploitative 'practical politics' even though they may have good intentions. A Dalit feminist standpoint is seen as emancipatory since the subject of its knowledge is embodied and visible (i.e. the thought begins from the lives of Dalit women and these lives are present and visible in the results of the thought). This position

argues that it is more emancipatory than other existing positions and counters pluralism and relativism by which all knowledge based and political claims are thought to be valid in their own way. It places emphasis on individual experiences within socially constructed groups and focuses on the hierarchical, multiple, changing structural power relations of caste, class, ethnic, which construct such a group. It is obvious that the subject/agent of Dalit women's standpoint is multiple, heterogeneous even contradictory, i.e. that the category 'Dalit woman' is not homogenous—such a recognition underlines the fact that the subject of Dalit feminist liberatory knowledge must also be the subject of every other liberatory project and this requires a sharp focus on the processes by which gender, race, class, caste, sexuality—all construct each other. Thus, we agree that the Dalit feminist standpoint itself is open to liberatory interrogations and revisions.

The Dalit feminist standpoint which emerges from the practices and struggles of Dalit woman, we recognise, may originate in the works of Dalit feminist intellectuals but it cannot flourish if isolated from the experiences and ideas of other groups who must educate themselves about the histories, the preferred social relations and Utopias and the struggles of the marginalised. A transformation from 'their cause' to 'our cause' is possible for subjectivities can be transformed. By this we do not argue that non-Dalit feminists can 'speak as' or 'for the' Dalit women but they can 'reinvent themselves as Dalit feminists'. Such a position therefore avoids the narrow alley of direct experience based 'authenticity' and narrow 'identity politics'. For many of us non-Dalit feminists, such a standpoint is more emancipatory in that it rejects more completely the relations of rule in which we participated (i.e. the brahmanical, middle-class biases of earlier feminist standpoints are interrogated). Thus adopting a Dalit feminist standpoint position means sometimes losing,

sometimes revisioning the 'voice' that we as feminists had gained in the 1980s. This process, we believe is one of transforming individual feminists into oppositional and collective subjects.

WORK, CASTE AND
COMPETING MASCULINITIES*Notes from a Tamil Village**

S. ANANDHI, J. JEYARANJAN AND RAJAN KRISHNAN

The present study explores how the rapid economic and socio-political transformation witnessed by Thirunur village in Chengleput district in Tamil Nadu is re-configuring notions and practices of masculinity in the village. In particular, there are two important aspects to the transformation in Thirunur. First, as shall be elaborated later, the dominance of the upper-caste Mudaliars over the Dalits, based on land-control, is being reworked because of the changes in the local economy of the village and the larger one of the district. Second, there is increasing employment of young women in the unorganised industrial sector in the towns neighbouring Thirunur. Both these changes, which are modifying in significant ways the relationship between caste, class and gender, constitute the context of the study.

Thirunur village in Chengalpattu district is, like most Tamil villages, divided into two sections. One section is the 'colony' which refers to the streets wherein the Dalits live. It is a large, expanding area with increasing occupation of *puramboke* (government waste) land and formation of new lanes. The Dalit population is mainly made of Paraiyars. The other section is the *ur* which consists of the areas and streets where other castes live. The other castes include Mudaliars (once the dominant landowners who wielded enormous power in the village), Chettiars, Acharis, Konars and Naickers. Vettai Naicker, a caste which is claimed as of

‘tribal’ origin, inhabits a street lying in between the two spatial segments. They are treated socially as being above the Dalits and below other castes in the pecking order of the local caste system.

The mainstay of economic activities in Thirunur, a zamindari village, had traditionally been around agriculture. The zamindars lived far from the village and controlled it by proxy through the upper-caste Mudaliars. The Mudaliars were the rent-paying direct tenants of the zamindars while all other lower-caste men were their sub-tenants. The Dalits were the agricultural workers. The abolition of the zamindari system in the 1950 put an end to this traditional agrarian regime. The erstwhile direct tenants, viz., Mudaliars, became landowners either by paying a paltry sum to the zamindars as a token price for the land they cultivated or by claiming occupancy rights. However, other caste men continued to remain as tenants or agricultural labourers of Mudaliars. Once dominated by the Mudaliars who controlled the landed resources, Thirunur is undergoing discernible change.[...]

In the late 1980s, an industrial estate exclusively for the small and medium-scale pharmaceutical units has been started in Alathur village, adjacent to Thirunur village. About 50 production units were built in the estate by Small Industries Development Corporation (SIDC) in 1985. These units employ about 3,000 women workers from the surrounding villages. Simultaneously, many other types of industrial units have also come up in the region. The boom in the garment and leather exports has resulted in many export-oriented units in general in the state. Since the district had many such units even earlier, the number of such units grew manifold fuelled by the export boom. New types of industries like the software and chemical units have also come up in the area. Though the number of unskilled workers who could be absorbed in such industries is much lower as compared to skilled labour, the sheer

number of units does absorb considerable number of workers from the surrounding villages particularly in the low wage segments.[...]

Demographically the Dalit families have increased steeply in numbers due to in-migration. The number of families belonging to other castes has declined. Particularly, many of the mudaliar landowners have migrated out of the village. As per our survey undertaken during 2000-01, the total population of the village stood at 2,516 and the Dalits accounted for about 68 per cent of the total population. We also note that nearly one-fourth of the population of both the Dalits and the non-Dalits are in the age group of 14-25 (whom we may identify as youths). Another one-fourth of the population is children (below 14) and the rest are adults.

A DALIT PAST

For the Dalit elders, the past is a picture of men wearing loincloths going very early in the morning to the fields to labour the whole day, under the supervision of their mudaliar masters. They had to take their young sons also to run errands for the Mudaliars, collect cow dung and graze the cattle. They used to be fed by the mudaliar women in the morning and in the noon. It is in the act of handing out food that Untouchability was reiterated most powerfully and on a day-to-day basis.[...]

[I]nterviews and focus group discussions with Dalit elders in Thirunur points to the total denial of masculine identity to Dalit men in the non-household domain, because of the logic of land relations and caste. If right to exercise power, employ aggression and dispense justice index masculine identity in a semi-feudal agrarian setting, none of these attributes were available to Dalit men. The public violence on Dalit men deployed by mudaliar landholders, the institutionalised corporeal practices that ensured that Dalit

men supplicated before the Mudaliars and acute forms of untouchability signify this. On another count, mudaliar women carried out the act of provisioning food in the most humiliating way to Dalit men on an everyday basis.[...]

The most dominant response to this emasculation of Dalit men by the Mudaliars and other forms of humiliation and violence seems to be staging acts of symbolic wish-fulfilment in safer locations. As a 47-year-old Dalit man recounted, ‘... even if the Dalits could not beat up the Mudaliars in person, they dismembered the bodies of Mudaliars after their death—when the bodies were left in the burning ghat for cremation. When they cut the dead bodies or beat them [into the fire], they used to abuse the body saying, “You have beaten us and tortured our forefathers, and you deserve more than this.”’ These symbolic acts are simultaneously inscribed by the Dalit men’s desire to be masculine enough and an acknowledgement of their inability to do so.

The Dalit men’s inability to protect ‘their’ women against the sexual domination of mudaliar men was again an important plank on which their lack of masculinity was enacted. For instance, an elderly Dalit man recollects,

In those days, when SC women worked in the fields folding up their sarees, many mudaliar men would look at their exposed thighs and pass some lewd comments like “the land shows up well and needs to be ploughed”. Some of them of course had illicit affairs with SC women, which is a well-known fact in the village.

This is a view that was endorsed by several of the elderly Dalit respondents. What we see here is a straightforward story of upper-caste male privilege over lower-caste women’s bodies, which in turn, constructs the lower-caste men as effete.

However, the sexual encounters between mudaliar women and Dalit men were a terrain of more complex negotiations

with serious consequences for the masculinity of Dalit men.... [W]ithin the caste-class matrix of power, the sexual encounters between mudaliar women and Dalit men were initiated by mudaliar women and not by Dalit men. They talk about how Dalit men were forced into or invited to have sex by mudaliar women. If 'sexual conquest' of women by men is a conventional sign of masculine identity, the very act of women initiating sexual encounter denies these encounters the quality of sexual 'conquest' by men.

On the contrary, Dalit men emerge as mere bodies without will, 'conquered' by mudaliar women for their own pleasures. Equally important is the regime of silence imposed on these encounters by mudaliar men. This silence enforced by caste-class power of upper-caste men, refuse the possibility of any 'verbal display' of these encounters by Dalit men and representing them as 'sexual conquests'. Without display, masculinity, which is always in a state of insecurity and requires constant demonstration, is rendered unavailable to Dalit men.

THE DALIT PRESENT

For the next generation of Dalit men (now aged between 35-55) their masculine identity centred around contesting upper-caste dominance, primarily by refusing to work for the Mudaliars and by getting direct access to land either as sharecroppers or as owners of land. Many Dalits have rented land from Mudaliars as sharecroppers. They use their family labour and supplement the agricultural income with earnings from non-farm employment. Over time, many have acquired small parcels of land from other castes. There are only very few Dalit households which still do not have access to land in Thirunur today. Dalits have also accessed land through encroachment.[...]

Though the economic entitlements of the Dalits have improved over the years, it does not offer them a self-

sufficient survival. The landed assets of the Dalits are too minuscule to sustain them throughout the year. Their caste subordination also continues in altered forms. They still cannot enter upper-caste houses and the temple car does not enter their quarters during festivals.[...]

Dalit youngsters keep away from agricultural work. Even while their parents consider owning and cultivating land as an important indicator of their social status, the Dalit youths take special pride in stating that they do not know how to till the land. This is so even in the face of poverty.... This act of withdrawal from agricultural work and instead looking for non-agricultural work outside the village is a move by the Dalit youths to break away from the history of subordination of their fathers and grandfathers, which is closely tied to agricultural work. For instance, a middle-aged Dalit man remarked, 'Nowadays men do not work for landowners [upper caste]. They also don't allow their parents to work [in the fields]. They go to work in the government or in factories in Aalathur, and do sculpting, construction work, laying roads, etc. Because of this, they are no longer slaves and live free.'[...]

However, the freedom from agriculture comes with an enormous economic cost for the Dalit youngsters. Work in the non-agricultural sector is sporadic with long stretches of unemployment. The employment history of most of the Dalit youngsters is marked by a great degree of footlooseness. In order to keep themselves employed, they move across different jobs.... The footloose employment of the Dalit youths is also a result of their inability to fit into the work discipline demanded by the manufacturing units. There are numerous instances of physical assault of supervisors by the Dalit youths and there are also cases of them stealing from the companies where they were employed.[...]

NEW DALIT MASCULINITY

Logic of Violence

The unemployed and casually employed Dalit youngsters are in the centre of reworking norms of masculinity in Thirunur. Their new awareness about caste oppression, their increasing numerical strength, and the decline of the economic power of the Mudaliars have all contributed to this process.

One of the important ways in which the Dalit youths assert their new masculine selfhood is by asserting control over public spaces in the village and by public display of violence of varying degrees—ranging from petty quarrels to sexual harassment of upper-caste women. As one Dalit elderly man states, ‘These days dalit youngsters deliberately roam in mudaliar streets and tease their girls. If somebody objects they go to beat them up.’ Dalit youths in the village are proud that the upper-caste people in the village are terrified of them. As a Dalit youngster puts it, ‘Youngsters of this place are very sensitive and if any one talks improperly, they get angry and quarrel. So everyone is afraid of them. The reason why men are like this is that they all want to be rowdy leaders—like underworld dons.’...

This new spatial politics is informed by a desire to rework the social. Caste encodes spatial segregation of the Dalits by designating their settlement as *cheri* or colony, and denies them equal access to the ur or the settlement of the upper castes. We have already seen how the temple car does not enter the Dalit settlement during festivals. The ability to roam the mudaliar streets by displaying acts of violence is a new embodiment of masculinity, which challenges upper-caste privileges.

However, this new territorial control and display of violence by the Dalit youngsters, on a different register, are reinforcing public patriarchy in Thirunur. Their violence is often directed against upper-caste young women who go to work or study.... Teasing of young working women is a

regular aspect of the Dalit youth culture in the village. These acts of violence have serious consequences for women's spatial mobility. A 42-year-old man from the vettai naicker community laments, 'The problem of colony people [dalits] is intense. They mock and ridicule our women. Frightened by them, some of our girls do not want to go to study. We also don't send them to school.'...

Thus, the politics of violence deployed by the Dalit youths in Thirunur, is restricting the newly emerging spatial mobility of women in the village. In short, the present-day articulation of masculinity by the Dalit youths has resulted in contradictory outcomes. At the level of caste, it challenges the pre-existing power of the upper castes, which has been affirmed through spatial practices and violence; and, at the level of gender relations, it reinforces patriarchy.

[T]hese acts of violence are not anchored in property or different forms of social capital, but exist as 'violence for itself'.... Second, the violence of the Dalit youths is located in 'embodied' activities—such as roaming the streets, teasing young women, and physical confrontation and aggression. While men of power affirm their masculinities by institutionalising them as norms (such as the need for the Dalit men of the past to supplicate before the Mudaliars, or the regime of silence imposed on the sexual encounter between Dalit men and mudaliar women) and/or in wider institutional locations where there is no need for constant physical display of masculinities, the disempowered are forced to assert their masculinity through 'embodied' acts.[...]

Acts of Consumption

Yet another way in which the Dalit youth assert their new masculinity and also separate themselves from the past Dalit subordination is by consciously recasting their appearance. Dress is the most noted and talked about

feature of their appearance. If the old Dalit men can be recognised by their loincloth and a towel, and the second generation by their *dhoti/lungi* and shirts, the current generation of Dalit youths can be identified by their jeans, shirts and shoes. Sporting a cap, wearing chains, bracelets and wristwatches are added embellishments. Even the non-Dalits have to acknowledge the new appearance of the Dalit youths. As a non-Dalit youth commented, 'Today they [dalit youths] are the ones who dress very well and eat well. They have a jolly good time. They appear to be upper caste people.' If appearance encodes caste distinctions, by redefining their masculine identity through consumption the Dalit youths are unsettling such distinctions.

Apart from their dress, they are also conscious of their physique and take every care to maintain their bodies. They keep their appearances smart by taking care of their hairstyles, moustache, etc. They also do regular body-building exercises like weightlifting and take keen interest in sports. According to them, an ideal man is someone who should have a well-built body and a good physique. As an 18-year-old Dalit youth states, 'A woman without a loud mouth and a man without a good physique cannot live in this village. Because every day there would be some quarrel.'

As part of constituting their identity through consumption, Dalit youths also indulge in tobacco and liquor. Though drinking has never been uncommon, the present-day youths are accused of indiscriminate consumption. Also, even while the Dalit elders did drink liquor and smoked, these habits were not employed to display manliness. This is evident from the fact that the older Dalit men always chose a discreet secluded place for drinking—a space that is completely marginal to the public space dominated by the upper-caste men. Also the elderly Dalit women too enjoyed the same space as men in consuming of liquor. Thus, in earlier times drinking had to be a discreet activity and not

to be displayed in public as it could be construed as disrespect shown to upper-caste men. However, drinking by the Dalit youths is to affirm their masculine identity in the public and to challenge restrictions imposed by upper castes as evident in the drunken brawls they engage in.... This re-fashioning of the masculine self by Dalit youths through acts of consumption comes with an enormous cost. Not based on adequate earning, it places tremendous pressure on the thin resource base of the Dalit households and leads to varying degrees of violence within the domestic space....

Seduction, Love and Marriage

With increase in spatial mobility of young men and women and the proliferation of sites of encounter between them such as bus stands and factory shop floors, Thirunur has witnessed during the past 10 years a number of elopements and inter-caste marriages. In this context of new sexual possibilities, love plays a central role in defining the masculine identity of the Dalit youths. As a prelude to love, their major pastime is to tease the girls who go to study or work.[...]

Enticing upper-caste girls is considered a major challenge to the masculine identity of the Dalit youths and they consider it as a victory, if they could fall in love and marry the upper-caste girls.... Though such inter-caste marriages invariably involve upper-caste women who are poor and go for work, they are presented as instances of upper-caste men's lack of control over 'their' women, and stand as a challenge to the masculinity of the upper castes as such.... Equally important, these marriages place enormous stress on the masculine identity of the upper-caste youngsters.[...]

'KALIYUGAM'

The new practices of masculinity displayed by the Dalit youths in the public domain of Thirunur have important

consequences for those who cannot be part of these practices—be they elderly Dalit men, Dalit women of different ages, upper-caste men and women....

Elderly Dalits

Commenting on the behaviour of the Dalit youths, an elderly Dalit woman of 65 years remarked,

It is *Kaliyugam* [age of destruction].... The younger generation forcefully prevents us from working for upper castes, but they do not provide us food. Can you believe that they beat their parents, wives and sisters indiscriminately? Instead of finding a job, they take away the money that our young girls earn. They abuse everyone at home in filthy language, despite their higher education. It is their time and it is their rule. We are subjected to their control.

Echoing similar opinion, a Dalit elder aged 67 said, 'Even before they grow a moustache, they have a concubine. They don't go for work. If the parents ask them [to go for work], they beat the parents up. They drink a lot. Those days it did not use to be like this. The reason for the change is, this is Kaliyugam....' This statement shows that the control exercised by the Dalit youths in the public domain of the village extends to the Dalit domestic sphere as well.... Unemployed or casually employed, but in need of extra money to meet the demands placed on them by the new norms of masculinity, the Dalit youths strain the limited family resources to which their contribution is sporadic and meagre. This in turn leads to conflicts between them and Dalit elders. One of the major complaints by Dalit elders is that the youngsters refuse to work in the field and also refuse to work elsewhere, but expect the family to meet out their expenses.... One of the Dalit elders, summing up the

situation, came out with a limerick, which translates as follows:

They look very stylish—boldness in excess
They all the time stare at young women around
Sorrow in the house—they put up big airs
A shame to tell the truth—
Their fine clothes are borrowed.

...

Dalit Women

An aspect of the masculine sub-culture of the Dalit youths is varying degrees of violence employed against women in the public sphere domain. This is demonstrated most powerfully by the Dalit youths' harassment of upper-caste girls in public on their way to work. Simultaneously what we have noticed is the Dalit youths' significant control over Dalit women—mothers and sisters—within their families. Their power to regulate women has not been contested either by men of upper castes or by those elderly Dalit men who are opposed to the violence of Dalit youths. It is left for the assertive tendencies in young Dalit women to contend with them.

While most of the Dalit men—both old and young—are not overtly opposed to women going for work, women's employment has considerably eroded their traditional role as providers for the household. This new domestic economy that depends on women's earning is creating new tensions over control of resources and women's sexuality.

The Dalit men are anxious about the increasing assertion of Dalit women both in the public and domestic spheres, which is a direct result of the emerging employment opportunities for women.... This is a perception that is shared by elderly Dalit men as well. A 63-year-old elderly Dalit man remarked,

Particularly the girls who go to work in companies cause irritation by their speech and laughter while travelling in the van.... There is a lot of change in the way they dress. They now wear a variety of colourful dresses. But in those days women covered their body better with simple saris.... They [now] wear “Jannal” (window) design blouses and the cloth is also transparent. It was possible to control the unemployed women those days. It is impossible to control the present-day employed women. They argue with their parents; do not respect their brothers; and do not wear decent dresses.

Here we get to see the quick transition of the Dalit men’s argument about women’s so-called ‘insubordination’ into one of sexual morality. Suspicions about women’s sexuality seem to be a major source of anxiety among the Dalit men as they see their main role as of protectors of ‘their’ women’s honour and family dignity.

In this atmosphere of suspicion, the Dalit youths, in an effort to assert their masculine authority, keep a constant surveillance of their sisters who are now spatially more mobile compared to the past. The following account by a 22-year-old Dalit working woman is illustrative:

... They [our brothers] would always watch our movements and constantly monitor us, whether it is inside the bus or outside. Anywhere and everywhere they keep an eye on us. They would follow us even if we go to temple. We are not allowed to talk to other men without their permission and the boys share information among themselves about whose sister is going where. If we violate their orders, they would threaten us with dire consequences, and even if they were younger to us, they would immediately report about us to our elder brothers who would punish us.

Additionally, as the Dalit youths’ new masculine practices include costly clothes and other items of consumption, they

depend on the family resources often earned by their sisters. For instance, an 18-year-old Dalit working girl states, 'On Sundays, we always have to wash their [brothers'] clothes and they would not let us watch the TV. Besides, they take away our money. If we refuse they would complain to our parents who would ultimately support our brothers.' Thus, on the one hand, Dalit youths are unwilling to share domestic labour and on the other, they claim a share in the earnings of their sisters. At once, as a strategy to counter their declining role as providers to the household, they devalue women's work and their contribution to the family economy by highlighting the low wages they earn.[...]

Upper-caste Elders

The upper-caste elders have a contradictory attitude towards the Dalit youths. Some of them seem to admire the Dalit youngsters in comparison to their own youngsters. For instance, a 30-year-old chettiar, the owner of the local teashop, commented:

Today only they [dalits] frequent my shop.... Particularly they enjoy the tiffin. The reason is many of the colony people go outside for work. Due to their low culture, they mostly do not make tiffin in the morning in their houses. The present-day youngsters like to eat in the shop. Only they have money and education now.... In the colony everybody in the family would go for work. The reason is, they understand the state of affairs in the country today. Only if we have some money, we can be comfortable. They wear good pants and shirts. Their fashion is very much like that in the town. They build now pucca houses with stones. They have unity. Here, people [upper castes] are jealous about each other and are vain glorious (*varattu gouravam*). They do not understand the changing times.

Such exaggerated statements about Dalit upward mobility has at once the quality of a lament about the upper caste present. The very act of overstating is a way of critiquing the present state of affairs in the village in the face of helplessness. Also, it does not erase the caste-based marginality of the Dalits who continue to be 'them' and marked, in their opinion, by low culture.[...]

With the unmaking of upper-caste masculinity in the public domain and the upper-caste men's inability to exercise control over the Dalit youths, they are reworking their masculine identity by means of increasing violence on 'their' women. The upper-caste men who talked about their loss of power and authority in the public domain are the ones who reported that they continue to abuse and beat their wives and daughters. As a 65-year-old mudaliar man said,

In my youth my wife used to be scared of me. I give her severe beating. My father used to beat all his daughters-in-laws heavily. We never interfered because he would beat us also if we do so. Then we also would beat up our wives.... People used to be terrified of mudaliars. Now everybody has run away. My wife still fears me. I do shout at her and at times I beat her up. But I don't quarrel with anyone outside. If someone beats me, I would think that god would punish him and come away.

...

At another level, women's employment in industrial units has directly challenged the upper-caste men's masculine identity of being the providers for the household. Their increasing experience of poverty has allowed some of them to recognise the importance of women's employment. However, they also express great anxiety about women's new-found mobility. This is particularly so given their inability to protect 'their' women from being publicly harassed by the Dalit youths or intimate relationships

blossoming between them and the Dalits.... A 70-year-old man belonging to the vettai naicker caste noted in anger: 'Women go to work [in companies] because these eunuchs send them to work. Why do they do that? It is very wrong to send women to work in the companies.' His invocation of eunuchs is important as it marks out men who allow or encourage women to work as non-men.

Upper-caste Youths

The general impression about the upper-caste youths is that they are a dispirited lot. Most of them are restricted by obligation to take care of their family agricultural land that is no longer profitable. Their attempts to find non-agricultural jobs are not easily accomplished, as they are constrained by notions of honour. This dilemma was quite well articulated by a 20-year-old mudaliar youth:

Dalit youth take up any job in companies and institutions. They dress up well, go to their workplace, change their dress and sweep or clean. [After the work] they switch over to their decent attire and come out. He may be a sweeper after all, but would convey an impression that he works in the factory or office. But the non-dalit boy cannot take up sweeping. They cannot take up a job of servile nature.

Their caste identity is now a liability. While it is no longer possible to enjoy the privileges of caste was unchallenged, the notion of caste honour inhibits free mobility. Some of them do take up professions like welding, etc. but they seem to have been imbued with a sense of defeat, which their elders have imposed on them.

The contrast between the Dalit and upper-caste youth stands excellently represented in their pastime activities. In fact, it is more than a pastime as both the groups consider the games they play as central to their lives. The Dalit youths use the school ground to play volleyball both in the

morning and the evening. They usually divide themselves into two teams and play every day and the key players rarely switch teams. The competition between the teams is fierce. The seriousness that they attach to the game is evident in their efforts to win both district- and state-level tournaments. The upper-caste youths have an equal passion for 'mangatha'—a game of gambling with playing cards. Whoever does not go to work would get enrolled for the mangatha game....

The differences between mangatha and volleyball are obvious. Mangatha is all about sitting and idling and chance decides the outcomes. But volleyball is physical and the outcome of the game depends on the individual and collective efforts of the players. The choice of their game—both of which function as sites for male-bonding by excluding women—in many ways gives us a clue about the nature of their masculinities. While the masculinity of the Dalit youths is assertive, that of the upper-caste youths is marked by a quality of dissipation.

CONCLUSION

What we have attempted so far is to map the changing meanings of masculinity in Thirunur village, which is witnessing rapid socio-economic transformation. In the new context that is marked by the declining economic power of the land-owning Mudaliars, a small improvement in the fortunes of the Dalits (compared to the past), opening up of non-agricultural employment opportunities for the young men and women, the Dalit youths are setting the norms for being masculine. While this has challenged the caste-based institutionalised oppression, which emasculated Dalit men in the past, the outcomes of the new masculine practices are complex and the cost of the new masculinity is borne mostly by women—Dalit and non-Dalit. Responding to their emasculation in the public arena, the upper-caste men re-

assert their masculine domination in the domestic sphere through the use of violence against women. In the case of Dalit youths, violence against women and de-valuing the authority of the elders, both in the public and private spheres, is used as a mechanism to define their hyper-masculinity. Thus, the articulations of new masculine norms by the Dalit youths have empowered a section of the Dalits with uneven results for the community of Dalits as a whole. Simultaneously, the empowerment of the Dalit youths itself is problematic. It is a process of empowerment that fails to transcend the limits imposed on it by the masculine identity.[...]

DALIT WOMEN AS POLITICAL AGENTS

*A Kerala Experience**

REKHA RAJ

The much-celebrated idea about Kerala has focused on its developmental and social progress which, or so it has been claimed, has enabled egalitarian modes of advancement for all social groups. The 1990s witnessed concrete challenges to such a presumption, with Dalit voices attaining fresh audibility and force in the Malayali public sphere. The illusion of a socially developed 'progressive' state has been exploded through the convergence of critiques from diverse marginalised political perspectives, especially those of caste and gender.

In this essay, I will be attempting to address a complex and vexed question that has been evolving and changing in recent decades especially, namely how to approach and understand the specificities of Dalit women activists' experiences in the context of Kerala's politics and social movements. Interviews undertaken with Dalit women activists in Kerala provide me with a useful point of entry into this discussion.¹ [...]

HISTORY OF DALIT WOMEN'S POLITICS

The Dalit women who initially associated with the women's movement in Kerala came mostly from a Dalit Christian background. They were active in Dalit struggles within the church and related institutions. The sort of exposure to ideas of social justice and equality, and the resources, though meagre, they could access through their lives in Christianity may have facilitated their entry to the 'general'

political domain. It is to be noted that the Dalit women's organisations formed with foreign aid during this period were under the leadership of the same women, who have not been part of the so-called Dalit movements. The support of protestant churches and related institutions enabled such initiatives.... All these organisations concentrated on giving training for Dalit women for various skills to help them to find better livelihoods. With all the limitations arising out of the fact that they worked from within a welfare mode, their interventions made possible the entry of a new political subjectivity—Dalit woman—into the discourses and public life of Kerala.

NEW SELVES, NEW ARGUMENTS

The end of the 1990s witnessed the emergence of more debates on Dalit women's questions thanks to the writings and interventions of Dalit women in Kerala. Emphasising the triple oppression that Dalit women faced, and developing a critique of both Dalit and feminist movements for being sexist and casteist respectively these debates foregrounded issues of representation, development, dowry, education, social mobility, and so on, not dissimilar to Dalit women's writings on the national scene. On the whole, the oppression of the Dalit women in India echoes issues such as state violence, denial of land rights, social and legal discrimination, infringement of civil liberties, inferior status, de-humanising living and working conditions, total impoverishment, malnourishment, bad health conditions (Manorama 1992)....

Dalit women's writings produced much criticism of hegemonic and feminist interpretations of family, marriage and women's mobility. Here we could find a shift in articulating gendered experience from an assumed modern 'subject' to a self, i.e. precisely defined in terms of community identity. This politics of difference was the

essence of Dalit women's criticism. History plays an important role in determining the social status of specific groups. The history of slavery is the legacy of many Dalit women in Kerala. Their ancestors went through the experience of being bought and sold in the slave markets at the will and pleasure of their masters. Lovely Stephen's great grandmothers were not allowed to believe in family—they were mere breeders, not mothers (Stephen 1997).[...]

This gives us further insight into how women's histories have rendered the experiences and lives of Dalit women invisible. Dalit women did not come under the term 'women'. The history written through such prejudices begins with the experiences and struggles of upper-caste women. Their narrative drive is their mobility from the kitchen to the performing field (*adukkalayil ninnu arangatheykku*). But the struggles in the same period, undertaken by a section of women who were denied human as well as womanly status, have yet to find a space in these accounts. The history of slavery still haunts Dalit women in the form of lack of resources and feelings of inferiority (Stephen 2000).

Thus, we find a different articulation of family and a different woman's self which were not present in mainstream feminist debates, even those that foregrounded the complex problems and changes associated with matriliney. Dalit women activists in this period see in the family a means to attain social status and an institution which provides scope for gaining both economic and social capital. The historical denial of family to the slave community kept Dalit women away from experiencing the emotional as well as material security of family that the upper-caste community enjoyed through generations.

FURTHER DEBATES WITHIN THE 'DALIT SELF'

A recent shift in Dalit women's writings focuses on questioning the existence of a homogenous and unified Dalit woman and defines identity more as a political strategy of resistance and self-definition (Raj 2005, 2006, 2012a)... A significant issue here is the discussion on the government order² which directed that the official caste of children in an inter-caste marriage would be the father's caste, which I have analysed in relation to inter-sectional issues of sexuality, choice and essentialist notions of Dalit community. In practice, such an order denied the children of Dalit women within an inter-caste marriage the community protections and benefits such as reservations and other kinds of educational assistance. Dalit sub-caste groups strongly advocated for the implementation of the order, because they saw the very act of such Dalit women as being against the interests of the community. Their response effectively suggests a 'punishment' for those who walked out of the community by depriving them of the few facilities enjoyed by the community so far. Another argument in favour of the order was that the children growing up in an inter-caste marriage have a much better intellectual capacity due to the inheritance from the higher caste father, hence that they were in fact unfairly taking away the rights of real Dalit children (i.e. Dalit children in endogamous families). These arguments ideologically deny Dalit women agency over her body. They are also blind to the 'complex symbolic violence which the inter-caste married Dalit woman has to undergo and negates the right of such women to represent the community and to be the guardian of her children' (Raj 2007). This issue was taken up by some inter-caste marriage associations such as Manusha. Their prolonged struggle for the withdrawal of the order did not get much support, other than from some Dalit groups and women's groups, precisely because the demand of gaining reentry to one's caste identity does not

sit well with the secular idealisation of inter-caste marriage, whose aim is for a casteless religionless society. Rajani Janu has discussed the same problem in relation to the latest judgment by the Patna High Court which says that the father be the natural guardian and that the caste of the father must be considered while giving a caste certificate to a child born from an inter-caste marriage. This judgment is against Dalit women's autonomy over her body and will affect unwed mothers even more adversely. How can one assume the caste of a child who does not even have an official father? In the context of Adivasi unwed mothers this judgment is particularly dangerous. It is the best example to show how power mechanisms treat Dalit women harshly when compared to mainstream women and Dalit males. Here we find a contradiction between the romanticisation of motherhood in our culture and how exactly society treats subaltern women (Janu 2004).

Resistance towards the stereotypical images of Dalit women and moving beyond the simplistic articulations of Dalit women's self is thus present in contemporary Dalit women's writing. Explorations into the subtle choices that Dalit women make, within the little space that they steal from a life ruled by the hegemonies of caste and gender are being discussed. The ambiguities of Dalit women's self are struggling for articulation (Raj 2012b).[...]

'ALL WOMEN ARE UPPER CASTE AND ALL DALITS ARE MEN'

Kerala witnessed many struggles led by Dalit and Adivasi groups in the early years of the twenty-first century. The majority of these struggles focused on land rights and some resisted imposed development projects in the Dalit and Adivasi settlements by the state (Muthanga land struggle, Kurichi struggle). We also find the emergence of various Dalit groups like Dalit Maha Sabha (DMS), Dalit Human

Rights Forum (DHRM), Dalit Service Society (DSS) and Dalit Students Movement (DSM) in this period. The audibility of the Dalit sounds became more and more voluble in these years as more and more Dalit writings got published in mainstream magazines. Books on and by Dalit writers received attention as well. Multifarious initiatives were also seen in theatre, cinema and the fine arts.³ Together they constituted a paradigm shift in Kerala's public sphere.

It was this vibrant ambience which enabled the emergence of new Dalit woman activist subjectivities in the public sphere of Kerala. These new women activists were radically different from the earlier Dalit women activists who engaged with the left and anti-caste movements. Instead of limiting themselves to being silent supporters of these movements, these new political agents have been active and strong. This is not meant to de-value the activists of earlier periods, but rather to note the visibility of these newly emergent Dalit and Adivasi women political subjects, with most of them being full-time activists. They recognise themselves as activists. I will briefly try to map their experiences to critically analyse how the caste and gender biases restrain their self-representation and see the way in which popular notions of women political subjects have strong exclusionary effects.

Contrary to earlier times these struggles received considerable coverage in media, especially the visual media. But it is the very modes of such representation that has often been highly problematic. Though they helped in breaking prior invisibility, the way in which they were coded in visual representations did nothing to break the traps of the stereotypical or the exotic. It must be noted that these women are never portrayed as 'women activists' but rather merely as 'activists'. They are always the carriers of community values or the icons of the desired

goals of the community. Their gender identity is less emphasised or noticed (Janu 2011; Saleena 2012).

This imposed a limiting choice of either being 'women', one which explicitly excludes the caste identity, or of being a community leader that disallows one's gendered identity. In debates on the women's question the caste identity of those 'women' does not become clear until a reference to the 'other woman' is made, whether knowingly or inadvertently. Similar is the case of Dalit debates where gender identity is taken to be neutral until a reference to woman is made. Woman and Dalit identities conventionally exclude Dalit women's experiences. Thus, the referential forms in these debates are articulated as follows, such as 'dalits and all women' or 'women and all dalits'. It is therefore tempting to draw on the parodic title of one of the pioneering books in black women's studies, namely 'All the women are white, all the blacks are men, but some of us are brave' (Hull et al. 1982). By way of analogy then 'all the women are upper caste and all dalits are men'.⁴ The observation of Bell Hooks (1981) that in the political discourses in the twentieth century just as in nineteenth century in the United States the term 'woman' has been synonymous with 'white women' and the term blacks synonymous with black men are also relevant in this context. We could simply replace the upper-caste women with women and Dalit men with black men. This ambivalence signifies to the possibility as well as the limitations of these activists, in terms of how their identities are constituted and over determined.[...]

THE QUESTION OF AGENCY

A critical review of the constructions around Dalit women activists by mainstream reports exposes how images are imposed and built around them. This is quite analogous to Patricia Hill Collin's discussions of 'controlling-images'⁵ in

the context of black women in the US (Hill Collins 1990). [These are images] demanding particular codes, both in public and private lives, in public actions, in dress codes and even in the agenda settings of their movements, negating room for fluidity in one's life choices or political interventions. For instance, during *kudilkettusamaram* (making huts and staying) in front of the secretariat, one of the main allegations against C. K. Janu was that she wore silk saris and appeared on TV channels with full make-up, thus exemplifying the fact that she is 'funded'! Though the Adivasi struggle succeeded in capturing the attention of the 'general' public (possibly with assumptions of being a pure innocent child-like people who need the help of the mainstream to become adults), it exerted an unconscious emotional demand on Janu to mimic the activist model constructed by Kerala's dominant political practices. The phobia created around the dress code of DHRM workers is another case in point in this context. Their uniform, which is made up of a black T-shirt with Ambedkar's image and blue jeans, de-stabilised the Malayali public's expectations. This is particularly so in the context of media-driven images of Dalit extremism.

Analysing the day-to-day experiences of these woman activists both in defined political spaces and undefined non-political public spaces (where politics are nonetheless still fully at work) might further help to bring out the complexities of the power relations they face. For instance, look at this narration by Saritha K. Venu:

Yes, it is the merit that signifies, I do agree. I have good writing as well as communicative skills in English, Hindi and Malayalam languages. I have an "Akashavani certified" high quality sound too. But the event management company where I am working now is not confident enough to send me as an anchor because of my black skin. If I pressurise them to send me as an anchor,

people will find something wrong about my work done. And I am sure that my presence and appearance will definitely disturb somebody there. (Venu 2011)

This demonstrates how the Dalit female body is typically treated by the mainstream sensibility. This also reveals the trivialisation and hypocrisy towards meritocracy in a caste society. She also observes that the so-called progressive Malayali secretly maintains her/his caste self which comes into visibility in intimate private spaces.[...]

Entering into public life is considered to be one of the important markers of social as well as personal mobility and an 'acquired' space enables the exercise of a certain level of power within the limitations allowed for by patriarchies. But we seldom find this to be applicable to a Dalit woman activist. Saleena Prakkanam shares her views thus: 'I am a leader of a movement and I am a woman leader, but who recognises it? Neither the media nor the authorities, not even the public does so. It is very difficult to get attention for the words of a lower caste woman. Would anybody have sufficient courage to scold Sreemathi or Ayisha Potti, as the police men do to me?'⁶ The occasion was her interaction with police officials at the district headquarters at Pathanamthitta, Kerala, during the Chengara land struggle....

Another struggle Kerala witnessed recently was the protest by the women's wing of the Kerala Dalit Federation (KDF). They were protesting at the ashram guesthouse by locking up the guesthouse manager who had been allegedly harassing a Dalit woman subordinate worker there. This protest evoked criticism from the public as the protesters physically attacked the manager, an upper-caste man, with a broom. The nature of the protest resulted in discussions on the violent form that it took, on how it should have been non-violent and so on. The women who participated in the protest said that this attack was the only option left as they

had tried all other Gandhian methods to no avail. There were also arguments in favour of the protest, celebrating it as a typical Dalit women's protest. But most of the women were unaware of the consequences. It turned out that many of them simply obeyed directions given by their male counterparts. Many were imprisoned. This instance raises two important questions regarding Dalit women's political subjectivity. First, it reinforces the stereotypical notion of Dalit women as being aggressive. Second, it leads to the question of agency, or rather its absence, for the participants of the protest.

It was the resistance by Chitralekha, a Dalit auto-driver in northern Kerala, which revealed the scope of the strategic deployment of Dalit women's identity in Kerala. From Payyannur, Chitralekha was one of the first women auto-drivers to enter a workplace dominated by men. Right from the beginning there was strong resistance to her entry, with a three-month delay in giving her membership to the auto-drivers' trade union. When she became a popular autorickshaw driver, the resistance took a violent turn. On many occasions, she was insulted with derogatory caste names and finally they burnt down her vehicle, depriving her of her only source of livelihood. She continued with her struggles with the support of various Dalit and women's groups both inside and outside Kerala (*Fact Finding Report*). The different stages of Chitralekha's ongoing struggles shows us the strategic and appropriate use of one's identity and her transformation from a 'victim self' into a 'political agent' through the process of self-representation.

In the initial stage it was a local struggle opposing the atrocities on Chitralekha, with the support of local human right activists and small progressive groups. They then invited individuals from different organisations including Dalit, and women's groups. This support group helped Chitralekha to obtain a rented auto for her survival, followed by a new auto by collecting money from

individuals and organisations all over Kerala. In the second stage, Chitralekha's struggle became more visible with the support of the media. She could establish a good network with those who politically supported her, including individuals, feminist groups, Dalit groups, youths and other alternate political groups. Through this she could strengthen her day-to-day struggle by ensuring the interventions of her supporters in each occasion where she faced problems. Two documentaries made on her and interviews published on online sites also helped in reaching her struggle to the national level. There was a kind of high alert in the sense that whenever Chitralekha was reported of being harassed, the response of support came from nation-wide groups. Even now her struggle continues. Unlike other issues which often fall under 'general' issues familiar in feminist discourses, her struggles defied such generalisations and succeeded in establishing the issue as a Dalit women's issue in all its complex dimensions. The flexibility she was able to show in securing support from differing groups shows the possibilities of a political subject transcending the usual stereotypes.

This particular Kerala experience is unique. We hardly find mass movements or large organisations in Kerala. Most of the movements have emerged as reactions and resistances to the local dynamics of caste and patriarchy. These local specificities of caste and gender and their implications for Dalit women activists in dealing with a more visible 'public life' through constant interactions with their community need to be understood. This exemplifies how flexible, and, at times, contradictory, a Dalit woman's self is.

Most often these women are the 'other'—leaving no options than to be either depicted as violent, aggressive, extremist women or as the poor victims of state violence and upper-caste exploitation. Thus, activists are generally invited to identify as exploited under the caste system,

making rights claims and seeking recognition from the mainstream. In other words, the interventions and demands made by these Dalit woman activists are articulated by the mainstream in a patronising generous manner that refuses these women the possibility of having individual interests not determined by their context.

TOWARDS A NEW DALIT FEMINIST CRITICISM

Dalit women's writings and interventions in Kerala show much resistance to the constructions imposed on them, thereby trying for an enabling self-definition. The struggle for self-definition not only de-constructs the existing constructions of Dalit women but also challenges the authority of those who possess the right to define. This indeed is a struggle against objectification and towards creative self-articulations. Experiences become primary factors in this process. This in no way means a desire for the fixedness of an experiential subject. As Bell Hooks (1989) points out, the articulation of the authority of experience along with the critique of essentialism is the desirable position in self-definition. That is, the self-definition must always be in process of critical self-reflection which opposes re-inscribing notions of an authentic Dalit women's identity.

To conclude, articulating Dalit women's experiences by exposing the operations of history by which their struggles were co-opted, subsumed, misrepresented or sometimes erased by mainstream debates and tracing the survival strategies by which these women have held out against political suppression and social isolation becomes crucial in contemporary Dalit feminist struggles in Kerala.

SECTION

VI

Contemporary Explorations

RESERVATIONS

*Experience as Framework of Debate**

KANCHA ILAIAH

I am one of those who became a lecturer in political science under the backward classes (BC) reserved quota in Osmania University. Given the unwritten laws of patronage and access that determine who gets jobs in our institutions, my first class MA, subsequent MPhil, and several publications in all-India journals would not have brought me a job but for the reservation. In my university, out of 1,200 teachers about 160 became teachers only because of reservations to Other Backward Classes (OBCs), Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs).

Apart from the job, what is it that the reservation in education gave us? Quite possibly at the time of entering the university, I was not as meritorious as many of my upper-caste friends were in terms of scoring marks, as the medium of instruction was English and I had studied in Telugu-medium rural schools. So in terms of presenting the answers in English, I was definitely at a disadvantage when compared to those who came from urban public schools. But as a student of political science, my advantage was my knowledge of rural and village polity; the rural economy and rural people and a close personal understanding of how power operates in everyday life. I kept comparing the political theories that I was studying with the village political structures, the class and caste systems that I was very familiar with. My frequent visits to my village, constant living in iniquitous caste cultures made me realise that the political system of India and the world were

operating on the same plane that the caste and class politics were operating in my village.

Seats through reservations in the colleges and universities to majority of the Shudra youth who did not have education for centuries, whose parents were illiterate, to whom books were never known at home, definitely opened up a new world. When I first entered a degree college for BA scraping through my PUC with biological sciences, opening the first pages of history, political science was really the opening of new windows to the knowledge of the West. In fact, the renaissance of the rural masses—the SC, ST and backward classes in a way began with the implementation of reservations (which began in 1967 in Andhra Pradesh). Many of my friends managed to get into university after having gone through school, living in social welfare hostels. For them it was the beginning of a new hope, a new life. In spite of the fact that poverty was haunting them there was the hope that they would get a job soon. Their parents were counting the days when they would see their children come home with degrees.

Later, in the course of my intensive study of Indian history, I realised that for those boys, the thrill of receiving an urban education was no different from the excitement of those Indians who went to England to study during the British period. In the Indian system even under British rule, those families commanded respect; their fathers were lawyers or employees of the British government or businessmen of considerable social stature, whereas for the boys coming from SC, BC families particularly, those coming from families like barber, dhobi, pot-maker, or shepherd (called Kuruma) communities, studying at Hyderabad in the early 1960s and 1970s was as momentous and important an experience as studying at London during the British period.

What impact does such a rural renaissance have on the village system? Our parents kept talking about the children

who were studying in the state capital. Those who got into medical or engineering courses became an important focus of discussion at the time when people came together at festivals or marriages. Every poor BC, SC and ST mother was dreaming of educating her growing child. She hoped they would become like those of us who were then studying in the big cities. The Hindu superstitious values that shudras, particularly Untouchables, were suffering from, were being dispelled. Trousers and bushshirts, the wearing of which was a privilege of the sons of the landlords, Brahmins and Baniyas spread to these families. The landlords' sons occasionally mingled with those boys who were in the colleges, though their parents desisted from such an interaction. It was really an experience to go through this change. The first day my brother and I wore trousers and bushshirts was a festive day in our house. My mother and father who were only used to wearing dhotis and saris above the knees saw in us the new garb, with the new brightness and the new wisdom which they could never dream of. Their clothes and lifestyles were the ones which had survived for generations. The clothes that we began to wear shook the basis of caste culture and backward living. But even this was brutally resisted by the landlords as this new dress in these caste groups was seen as a threat to their cultural hegemony.

When I talk about our illiterate parents I am not even for a moment suggesting that they were unskilled people. One need not be sorry to have been born in such families. For example, my mother was an expert wool-thread maker; she was an expert seeder; she was an expert planter. My father was an expert sheep-breeder. Each caste group acquired lot of skills in its own sphere. More than anything else, they were and are great human beings who in spite of their economic difficulties would not let a newcomer or a passerby to go hungry. Their skills and human qualities went unrecognised by the 'meritorious' educated society.

The contempt of the 'meritorious' towards our people comes through very clearly, when they resort to sweeping roads and polishing boots. The contempt of the 'democratic' press also comes through in its cartoons.

As the first student who entered the degree college from my village (my village consisted entirely of shudras except for two families of baniyas who were petty traders), I know what a telling impact it had on the entire village. As there was no landlord to envy me, so many people celebrated my joining the college! Almost in every second family, wife and husband, had heated debates about sending their children to school and college as my mother had. To some extent I was fortunate because I did not have to contribute to the family income like many boys of my age group because my family was relatively better off. My family was in a position to spend some money on my education. But that does not mean all those who were in similar economic position sent their children to school. In fact, more than money, culture was coming in our way.

I would not have got a seat in BA with my third class PUC certificate. The others with whom I was competing were the sons of landlords in my district who by then (1971) established urban residences only to educate their children. Apart from the landlords there were brahmins and baniyas who had the background of education and employment in the state sector, or the income from temples or own comfortable business. So at that stage of training, and knowledge I could not have got better marks than what I got in PUC.

But it was not only the village that changed. I did not remain what I was after joining the degree course. I opted for English as one of my subjects only to learn English and began to develop hopes that I would make it into the Indian Administrative Services (IAS). For that there were two reasons. One was that an SC person (Madhava Rao) was our district collector. He was said to have been helping the

SCs and BCs a lot at that time. As the collector's residence and office were adjacent to my degree college, I would see the queues of SCs and BCs in front of Madhava Rao's residence every day. Second, one of my teachers was not only an admirer of Madhava Rao but, was also trying to encourage us to emulate the collector and help the people. This teacher whom I was referring to was a brahmin who himself missed the IAS bus. Unlike many brahmin teachers, he never thought that attending to the problems of the SCs and BCs and helping them in small ways made Madhava Rao a bad collector. So I was determined that I should make it to the IAS and started working in the Warangal regional library from morning to evening. During this time, I did some intense reading of Marx and Engels as only these two thinkers appeared to be talking about things related to my village, the classes that were around us. Only in their writings did I find that the all-powerful landlords of our area were being portrayed as villains. My feelings about the landlord was right there in their theory of exploitation.

On Sundays, when I was in the village I conducted classes for my illiterate and semi-literate village friends in the tea shops and at my residence, telling them about the changes that were coming in the Soviet Union and China. I still remember that when we conducted a class in the village school on the changes in Europe and India many illiterate village elders, their sons, peasants, even some school children belonging to all castes attended it. After the talk was over, I remember how many peasants belonging to the BCs and SCs told me that they were determined to send their children to school. Thus education becomes a dream for them. This dream begins because here is a person who came from their neighbouring family, who bears their name and has now become knowledgeable. They feel that it is not impossible to see their own child also becoming knowledgeable like this person. With the reservations

higher education was brought down to the SC, ST and BCs. This was like Hegel bringing god from heaven to earth. Earlier, in almost all the villages education had been restricted to the brahmins, baniyas and landlords and these people were distinct from the rest. Their children had no interaction with the working-class masses.

We must remember the fact that the so-called renaissance that took place in the nineteenth century during the time of the British rule was confined to the non-Shudra upper-castes and in our state it was extended only to few shudra upper-castes like Reddys and Kammas. However, with reservations being extended to OBCs in 1967 educational change was visible. So far as the rural BCs were concerned this was the beginning of their renaissance. In certain parts of the country, because of the conversions from SCs to Christianity there was some spread of education, but the BCs remained completely untouched. Not that all of them were absolutely poor. Some caste groups had some land; some were relatively better off than their artisan brethren. But educationally they were far more backward than the Christian SCs. The shudra caste groups (except Reddys, Velamas and Kammas) in Andhra Pradesh used to think that they were not destined to enter educational institutions. Educational institutions were the places of brahmins, Doras and baniyas giving currency to the proverb (are we brahmins or baniyas to go to schools).

After I was educated and employed the attempts of several families from my village to send their children gained momentum. It is as a result of such attempts that a boy called Sambaiah became an engineer getting a seat in BE in the reserved quota. He did extremely well in studies. Some SC and BC boys completed their inter and degree courses and found jobs. One BC boy became a teacher. Two Kapu boys completed their post-graduate courses and subsequently one is engaged in research. The fact remains that now the whole village looks at education as one of the

vehicles for social change. I gave up the hope of becoming an IAS officer as I was not willing to go for trials. I am sure I would not have got it as no single BC person from Andhra Pradesh has made it into the IAS so far. Instead I turned to research in rural political economy, civil liberties, ancient India and so on, along with my teaching job.

The point is that if there is no reservation for OBCs in the all-India services hardly any rural OBCs can compete with urban, public school products. We can only compete with those whose backgrounds are similar to ours, whose cultural experiences are similar to ours. Having come from inequitable backgrounds, inequitable cultures, speaking languages which have been reduced to being 'dialects' differing from others in our whole upbringing, it is just not possible to compete in tests even if some economic facilities are provided.

FROM CASTE TO CLASS

The Indian village system is ridden with caste hierarchy. In my childhood and school days, dining with other caste group houses was hierarchically prohibited. For example, the pot-makers used to consider themselves superior to kurumas (shepherds and wool weavers); the kurumas used to consider themselves to be superior to Goudas (toddy tappers); Padmashalis, dhobis and barbers, etc. Each higher caste avoided dining in the house of lower caste. But with the spread of education, friends started dining in each other's houses. In the beginning, our parents grumbled and said that we were polluting caste culture. We in turn started telling them about what this caste institution was and how we were divided by the upper castes into all kinds of caste groups. But the resistance to allowing our SC friends to sit with us and dine with us used to be strong. Even now the resistance continues. But we were taking risks. Our SC friends who dressed like us were made to sit

with us and eat with us. I remember how my mother would scold us when we dined with an SC friend called Samuel.

Particularly with college education making a presence in the villages through reservation, the educated youth began to understand the importance of the class factor very clearly. The caste system began to lose its hold. The BCs began to look at the Reddy landlord, the brahmin patwari and the baniya shaukar as inimical forces. College dropouts went back to settle down in the villages. They began to resist landlord atrocities, began to oppose the patwari's hegemony, and to keep the village baniya in check. These educated youth began to demand political power. For example, in Telangana where the Naxalite movement is strong, quite a number of young people from the BCs rallied round the Naxalite groups and fought against the landlord-patwari hegemony. Though untouchability continues to keep the SCs and BCs separate even today, the BCs are forging themselves into a class force. Wherever Naxalite groups are strong the SC-BC unity is also seeming possible because of the educated and ideologically motivated youth. The Dalit movement tried to strengthen this unity further. College and university education has played and is playing a very important role. But for the reservation, this change would have been impossible.

In Andhra Pradesh, the 1986 anti-reservation agitation strengthened the class unity of BCs, SCs and STs. The slow movement of rural masses from caste consciousness to class consciousness is a very significant social change and this is closely related to the system of reservations.

In contrast, for the upper castes, particularly those who are agitating against reservations, education is only a means of ensuring a comfortable life. For those who have been educated for generations a college seat does not mean social change, it does not mean a massive stir in cultural values. It is one of the methods to add to existing comforts. The 49.5 per cent reservation to us (BCs, SCs and

STs put together) is, therefore, seen by them as taking away the comforts of 49.5 per cent of upper castes. But for us it is an altogether different matter. For us, it is a source through which all our relatives and friends will get in touch with education, through which some of the villagers can get medical treatment for some complicated diseases.

It is true that with a job in the state sector our living conditions would improve. Some of us may long for these comforts but more important by far is the way the changes shake our historical and cultural backwardness. It also gives us new confidence. This is something the anti-reservationists do not want to consider; this they do not want to see as a process of national development. They speak of efficiency, but they do not want to face up to the fact that an 'efficiency' that does not address itself to the problems of the masses of the nation is no efficiency at all. [...]

WHAT IS MERIT?

Ever since the prime minister announced the implementation of the Mandal Commission recommendations granting 27 per cent jobs to OBCs in the central services, the question of merit is being made out to be a big issue. All kinds of theories are circulating around it. The anti-reservationists, including students and intellectuals of left and right political moorings seem to think that 'merit' is the most sacrosanct thing in this country. They seem to take it for granted that some unilaterally defined entity called merit is the most important factor in the nation's economic and political life. These theoreticians cite three areas where 'merit' has to be guarded—the administrative services, the medical and scientific services and engineering services. It must be noted that each class defines merit in its own interest. This is true of not only merit but things such as beauty, honour,

excellence, etc. We need to debunk the present theory of merit which makes for a relative position in rank list based on marks in written examination. Securing good marks in all such examinations depends to a large extent on having the advantage of educated parents, availability of books and providing coaching at a young age. If BC, SC and ST students get lower marks than the upper class/caste students this does not mean that they have less intelligence or capacity to learn.

For transforming a society like ours what is the contribution of merit? Can merit be de-linked from the culture, development and ultimately from social change? Was Gandhi, who narrowly escaped academic failure each time, less meritorious than those who scored 85 to 90 per cent marks only to become money-minded lawyers? Was he less meritorious than a person who makes it into the IAS by scoring 90 per cent only to treat that job as a cozy comfortable position? If marks and writing is the criterion to decide merit Ambedkar was far more meritorious than either Gandhi or Nehru. Instead of entering into a Vedic on merit we shall look at the issue from the point of view the masses who are the subjects of social change. This is necessary because today almost every political party, at least overtly, accepts that there is a need for social change and accepts that the administration has to be oriented towards that change.

Indian administrators are supposed to bring about a social change to which the Indian Constitution is committed to. Social change in essence means improving the living conditions of the backward masses, the SCs, STs BCs and minorities. What is that an administrator is required to do in order to bring about this social change? To change the caste inequalities we require a person who can understand the humiliation that the caste institution confers on some. He should know how it operates, understand it sensitively and feel that this should go. To achieve this goal who is a

better suited person for the job? Can one who has benefited from the caste system do this job? Surely one who suffered from this system can do the job better? Leaving the opportunists that come from that background aside, by and large all those who are educated from that background hate to be maltreated. And hence they will have to work against caste system.

The second thing that the civil servant is expected to do is to change land relationships, in an agrarian society like ours. There are landlords and there are landless masses. The government has to distribute the land to the landless having uncompromisingly acquired it from the landlords. Except in few states by and large the landlords belong to upper castes and the landless belong to the SCs, STs and BCs. In this situation, which officer will be able to do this job effectively? Obviously, one who has some sympathy for the landless poor. The sons and daughters of the present bureaucrats come from the Banjara Hill bungalows (a posh locality in Hyderabad) whose parents either have no roots in the village system even if they do are among the landlord families. They have little interest in pushing such changes through. But the masses are expecting (the Constitution has been promising them) something different from them. To run such an administrative system what is the need for such advanced knowledge of English? What is actually needed is commitment, experience, the ability to coordinate things. Do not all these things come to people who are educated in the native languages? If you scrutinise the issue carefully, scoring high marks is directly related to acquiring proficiency in English. At this juncture of development and underdevelopment of the country, of what use to us is the mere 'merit' of marks and of proficiency in English?[...]

MEDICINE AND ENGINEERING

Medical and engineering courses are being shown as courses which are being thrown into the hands of meritless people with the coming of reservations. These professions are said to be the ones which need a lot of skills. The argument is that those who get less marks in this training, if they become doctors and engineers our patients will die and our bridges will fall down soon. This is an argument which appears to be correct on the face of it. But the absurdity of the argument has to be seen in the context of the life of the rural masses.

Let us just turn to the rural reality to understand this question. Let us begin with engineering. Engineering skills did not fall from heaven. They are acquired through a process of training and experience. Who nurtured the engineering skills in our villages for hundreds of years? Take for example, the metallurgic engineering skills that developed in Indian villages. Even now in our villages the peasants take the iron rods to an ironsmith and ask him to make all kinds of tools like sickles, axe, knife, bullock cart wheel bars, etc. How does the ironsmith do this? Only by applying systematic skills, by heating the iron at a particular temperature, by beating with a particular force and by cooling it in a particular order. These skills are part of engineering skills. Now suppose the son of an ironsmith with some education, but with lower marks in english or chemistry than the boy who is born in a brahmin family, becomes a metallurgical engineer—might he not make a better metallurgical engineer? Why after all would a person become an engineer in this?—is it to improve the rural and urban people's living conditions or not? Why does one turn to research in engineering? In order to improve the rural conditions of Indian people does one have to go to the US for research or to the Indian villages again? [...]

Many of our farmers have scientific skills. They know when it will rain. They can tell us what natural signals would bring forth certain climatic changes. They know

where a dam should be built in order to irrigate larger area. If a person who comes from these peasant families with some basic training to organise and hypothesise things he would definitely make a more useful engineer in the agrarian sector than a boy who has spent his time in urban centres. Does it really matter whether the peasant's son got relatively lower marks if he fulfills the basic requirement? The real tragedy of engineering in this country is that it is separated from the people's needs, people's knowledge and their environment. The government constructs bridges only to fulfill the electoral promises. The relatives of the ministers become contractors. To each one of them making some illegal money becomes the main issue. All these so-called meritorious engineers have been issuing raise certificates to the contractors in order to make some easy money. Nowhere in this whole process does 'merit' come into picture. In what way would reservation dilute merit? What an engineer needs more than anything else is concern for people and knowledge about the environment along with some basic skills.

Let us now turn to medicine. Who contributed to the development of medical sciences in India? In developing the Unani and Ayurvedic medicines, the peasants, artisan groups and tribals contributed a lot. The nomadic tribes like kurumas and Banjaras have known a number of plants which have medical value. They discovered roots which had medicinal value. Peasants had laboured to know what mixture of leaves gives rise to which particular medicine. They were the ones who discovered how to patch up the broken bones of a human being or an animal by tightly folding particular type of wooden plates around the broken leg. Even today many of our village artisans are experts in these clinical operations. They were the ones who learnt to cure some diseases by cauterising a particular part of body with a particular rod in a particular fashion. All our modern

medical practices emerged from these practices. In fact the priestly class of India was always against these medical practices. The brahminical class had developed the theory that touching a dead body results in pollution which actually hampered the development of our medical sciences. If the shudras are to say that since even now priesthood is fully reserved to brahmins only on the basis of caste the medicine should also be fully reserved to shudras on the basis of caste, what is wrong with that argument? Practical medicine was the profession of shudras. Do the brahmins agree to the fact that there should be an examination for priesthood and whoever gets more marks only such meritorious person should become priests?

It is this ideological hegemony of the brahmins that is giving them political advantage. Hence the theory of 'merit' is a myth. And they are pursuing it now only to advance their self-promotion. The shudra masses never lacked the skills. If we strictly go by their skills in engineering, medical and agricultural professions the shudras should inherit the engineering, medical, agricultural courses. What actually the shudra masses lack as against the brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaisyas is training in reading and writing and this has been violently denied to them historically. Even today the anti-reservationists are defining 'merit' based on this single skill of reading and writing. This is absolutely unscientific.

When it comes to the question of reservations to the OBCs in education and employment the argument should not be reduced to who has merit in securing marks. Nor does it have to be viewed from the point of view of Mandal Commission's recommendations. It should be viewed from the point of view of the fact that for centuries in spite of acquiring skills in all kinds of professions, the shudra masses were denied education. Protective discrimination has got to be based on caste. This option becomes necessary because we have not opted for scientific socialist

system where castes and classes would have slowly been destroyed in the process of providing full and compulsory education and employment to all.

Those of us who acquired education and employment through reservation feel that this process is inevitable. By liberating the shudra masses from their social and educational backwardness we would be contributing a lot to diluting the caste rigidities. This process certainly would go a long way in social transformation within the framework of liberal polity. At the same time we must remember that revolutionary options for destroying the caste and class institutions are different. And those options would have different implications to the society. But social change cannot simply wait till revolution comes. The reservations to the OBCs, SCs, STs and women have to be seen as a part of this process of social change within the democratic polity.

THE IMPOSSIBLE SUBJECT

*Caste and the Gendered Body**

SUSIE THARU

No reader familiar with the canonical texts of modern Indian literatures needs to be told how large the figure of the Hindu widow looms there, and in what unexpected places it makes an appearance. Indeed—and I discovered this to my surprise while working on *Women Writing in India*—from about the middle of the nineteenth century onwards this figure has held a more-or-less centrestage position in the national imagery. It could be argued, and I am going to do so, that when a writer features a widow as protagonist he or she is, consciously or unconsciously, making an intervention in a debate centred on this figure; a debate whose history is a history of Indian humanism and its intimate yet troubled relationship with Indian feminism. It is only when we frame widow-narratives in this way that other crucial dimensions of the genre become apparent. The widow is a figure whose very life is marked by a specific death. She is *vidhava*—without husband—and consequently in need not only of public protection, but also of regulation, governance. Widow stories, therefore, are invariably also subtly modulated historical engagements with questions of governmentality and citizenship.[...]

To what extent has this embodied and cognitive self—or a very similar one—also been the body-self unwittingly affirmed and renewed by historical feminism? What does that norming cost the feminist movement? How might it affect possibilities of egalitarian and democratic alliance or initiative? These are chastening questions and ones that we

might learn how to ask as we find our way through ... Baburao Bagul's 1969 story about a Dalit widow.[...]

The mandatory summary to begin with. This is a difficult task, because unlike a well-made short story which is pared down to a single focus, the plot here is layered like that of a novel and is bustling with character and event. The time-span of the story has a classical brevity (one evening, seven pages), yet the narrative is structured as a series of episodes that cut from location to location, flashback from the immediate present to the recent and the more distant past, and shift focus from the private world of the subject-self to the outer world of power. I think the only possibility might be to risk brutalisation of the structuring of time in Bagul's narrative and present a chronology of events. I hope that the scope and texture of the story can be regained, partially at least, in the discussion.

Sometime before he was born, Pandu's mother and father leave their village and come to the city after the father, in a fit of jealous anxiety, 'almost kills his brother with an axe'. Things are only worse in the city. The mother has to work all day at construction sites to feed the family and pay for milk and medicines. Her husband, drunk and tubercular, is too weak and overwrought with resentment and suspicion of his wife to find work himself. The sexual tension between them builds up and spills out into their already tense world in which abuse and attack are the everyday texture of life, not only for them but for everyone. He accuses her of selling herself for favours, tries repeatedly to deface her, makes an attempt to brand her body with hot tongs; she turns on his dying body in vengeance demanding her 'conjugal rights,' hoping to hasten his death. When he dies, she feels she has killed him. Ten years elapse. She has continued to work, resisting, for her son's sake, the advances of several men, despite desperate need for the material benefit that would accrue. Pandu is at school, but he is miserable. He never smiles, never responds, either to

the teacher or to the taunts of other children. His body, Bagul writes, is lead. One evening, back from a usual school day of attack and abuse, sitting alone in his empty hovel waiting for his mother, hungry yet unable to stomach the cold gruel left for him on the hearth, the small changes in their everyday life begin to 'make sense' to him. He reads them, indeed reads himself in them: new Diwali clothes, a new tilt of his mother's head, a new drape to her clothes, a fresh intensity to the taunts at school and on the street. His mother is a whore. He the son of a.... When she returns from work, braving that day as every day the sexual attacks and the moral reprobations of the street through which she must walk to reach the relative safety of her home, Pandu turns on her the full force of his pain and resentment. He shouts at her and runs out of the house. I quote:

The room now seemed to her like the cremation grounds.... She heard the sound of the dogs in the distance, and thinking he had come back, joyfully opened the door.

"Come son, forgive this old sinner."

The door opened and the overseer stood in the doorway. His massive frame seemed to dwarf everything else in the room.

"What's happened? Why do you look so scared? You are sweating." He hugged her, pretended to wipe the sweat off her face, and started caressing her arms and her breasts. She slowly responded, and out of the hunger of the past 10 years of widowhood flared an uncontrollable desire. And that was why she failed to hear the timid knock at the door, the faint, hesitant cry, "Mother!" He saw them, his mother and the towering figure of the overseer in a tight embrace. His last hopes seemed to crash about his head; broken-hearted, he wildly rushed towards the door. She saw him then, strained after him,

calling his name, but the overseer, already blinded with lust, refused to let her go; he was pulling her into the room with his strong brown arms. Pandu was running away at great speed; his fast falling tears had almost blinded him, the stray dogs ran at his heels, snapped at him and now he was screaming, shouting with terror, afraid of the dogs....

She was trying desperately to escape from the bear-like hug of the overseer. But like a person stuck fast in the quagmire, she found release impossible....

A summary of this kind necessarily scants detail and structure. It also excludes from its scope one of the most stunning aspects of the story—what I will call, following Walter Benjamin, a linguistic ‘air’. A few comments on this air. For those normed by its procedures, the everyday use of language assumes, indeed can assume, a fit so close between the sign and its referent that the referent saturates the domain of signification. In *The Task of the Translator*, Benjamin refers to this mode in which language is used as the linguistic air, arguing that translation rises to (but also exists in/has the bearing of) a higher and purer linguistic air than the original, since a translation is concerned less with the transfer of meaning or information and more with essaying a mode of signification. The linguistic air in Baburao Bagul’s story is related to that of a Benjaminian translation, though it is not identical. The linguistic air of a translation draws attention to the signifying system that is another culture. In the nether world of Bagul’s story, on the other side of the border in which sign and referent have a natural fit, language does not just thematise another process/mode of signification. In that air, reality is self-evidently an effect of the symbolic whose logic is apparent everywhere. Signification is a full-scale materialising and de-materialising force. Events, bodies, persons, objects and selves are signs that have to

be cautiously investigated and deciphered if they are to make sense.

In this linguistic air, which is as much the air of real life as it is of the art work, bodies are so wayward that they must be branded; tuberculosis is a caste-mark, memory an aspect of present time and public location; it rushes in from the world to habilitate a personal past; a body-subject whose life is not affirmed by another spirals rapidly back into insignificance. There can be no leisure in this world that must move to the busy beat of an elsewhere, no time for pause, no occasion for consolidation for reader or storyteller. Nothing holds, nothing stands still, nothing may be taken for granted. It is the symbolic that gives birth to subjects, and tempts their dreams with agency while it watches ceremoniously over their many and rapid deaths. A single death would indeed be a comfort.

In addition, the subject in this nether world is not 'impossible' simply because agency is an effect of discipline, or because it is in process, or because it is not affirmed in citation-reiteration, or indeed because one and one can never actually make a One, an integral whole, and there is always a remainder. It is impossible because it is constantly annihilated.

... '*Mother*' could well be read as the drama of life and death in the scene of the Untouchable family. The narrative turns us into witnesses as mother, son, husband, wife, lover, suitor, man, woman and child give birth, one to another, and die, kill, desire or imagine the death of the other in a series of overlapping acts of affirmation and denial. Indeed the story opens with a longish account of one such coming-to-life and its death. Normally indifferent and listless, 'backward' children thrill to 'a new joy of being' as they listen to a teacher read out a poem about a mother who is a river of life, a *Vatsalya Sindhu*. The poem 'transports them into another realm' and their 'muddy faces sh[i]ne with a strange wonder' as they smile 'happily through their

unkempt hair'. Enabled by the poem to map those mythic proportions onto memories of his own mother, the young protagonist, Pandu, magically comes to life as 'a child'. A body, stooped with the load of his living, straightens into normality. It returns to him, rather, it returns him to himself: he wants to shout, to wave his arms about in joy. The new propriety also finds this Untouchable housing in a community: 'the hostility he usually felt towards his classmates abated somewhat. He sat watching them at play and a benign smile slowly came to his face'.

Sealing the contract of reconciliation between secured self and habitable world is the high point of Pandu's new-found happiness and vitality: the assertion of his own ability to exclude another. 'Snotnose', he and Lakhu shout out at another boy in spontaneous consolidation of their exuberant togetherness. The poem he listens to in class literally has the power to inspire Pandu. It breathes him into brief life as son, as child and as 'touchable' member of a community. It gives him a mother. But the imaginary interpellation is hardly born before its life is snuffed out by another more compelling one: 'Don't touch Pandu, any of you. My mother says his mother....' Kishan's yell and the laughter it elicits from the class drains Pandu of life: he slowly returns to his seat and sits down woodenly'.

It is a double murder this—of child and mother—and one that will be insistently re-enacted, elaborated and related to other dramas of life and death in the story. The domain of the symbolic sustains all life and demands merciless maintenance of its extraditions and death sentences of which there are many kinds. There are those rehearsed in the desperate masquerades that play at and endorse power in the very face of powerlessness (Bhaga the school-rowdy, Dagdu his community role model, the jealous husband, the sexually-demanding wife.) Thus,

Bhaga put up his shirt collar, like a street rowdy, squared his lips and told Pandu, "You bloody pimp. Just come out. I'm going to murder you". He removed a rusty old blade from his note book and threateningly placed it at Pandu's throat.

More characteristic of this world, however, are the real murders, not these make-believe ones. Those involve the actual or desired elimination of a killer(s) and are posthumous acts of self-defence in which a murdered person must kill in order that he or she may live again. Thus, orphaned by Kishan's remarks, Pandu feels a 'demonic, murderous rage rising within him. He could have killed them, murdered them all in cold blood. It was good to think of them lying together in a pool of blood'. Walking back from school that evening Pandu encounters a drunken Dagdu. He is scared, but when Dagdu, jealous and depressed, insults his mother, Pandu loses 'his childlike feelings as the murderous fires continued to haunt him; he felt like hurling a heavy rock at Dagdu's swaying, retreating form and his mind's eye was luridly coloured by the spraying blood that he imagined would gush out of Dagdu's head'.

Structurally analogous to the many deaths, murders, births and re-births that constitute Pandu's life, is the coming-to-life and new death of Pandu's mother, the murder she commits, the ones she dreams of committing, the ones committed on her. For a man in this world, a wife's youth or her beauty are not sources of joy but of anxiety and emasculation. Beauty is the property mark of the world across the border, a branding. A beautiful woman is one who has been picked out by its laws, one whose life is held by its designs and its assumptions. To make a beautiful woman his wife, to hold her in that esteemed position and thereby to affirm his own proper masculinity, his status as husband, a man must erase those marks which are also the

marks of his emasculation, his dispossession, the impossibility of personhood. Pandu's father's blows, therefore, were always aimed at destroying [his wife's] full-blown beauty. He hoped she would lose a lot of blood, become lame, deformed, ugly and so in spite of his ebbing strength, he would aim at her face, nose, head, eyes. Then he threatened to kill her when she was asleep. He blamed her entirely for his disease, his failing strength, his joblessness.

For similar reasons, he would rather 'die, allow this child to die', than let his brother, who looks at his wife with 'lust in his eyes' anywhere near them. For Pandu's father, this brother is the most dreaded of mirrors, one into which he cannot bear to look, for he sees there the image of his own utter degradation/death in one who is his own flesh and blood. To survive he must break that mirror—kill, even his brother.

For the woman who is Pandu's mother, the memories that haunt are those of the 'most degrading act of the day' when her husband would strip her and scrupulously check out her body and its clothing for marks of her infidelity. The break point comes when she wakes up one night to find him heating tongs to brand her body, to mark it indelibly, to burn into it the sign of his possession. It will be a mark of power, indeed of patriarchal power, but it is at the same time a mark of his desperation. It is she now who turns to the kill. She will demand—and like the demands that he makes of her, this too is an excessive, impossible demand for his failing tubercular body—she will demand that he husband her, and in the process push him into death. She will want to murder her son too when she recognises in his eyes the 'same dark suspicion' she has seen before in the eyes of his father.

Like Pandu, who momentarily comes alive in the promise of the poem, she too glimmers into brief life in the arms of the overseer at the construction site. With the affirmation

he provides she can walk straight, 'secure in her newfound love'. Her mirror now refracts a different light and she grows desirable in her own eyes as much as in his. But for this Dalit to find bodily life thus, as woman-self, she must die as mother. 'Whore, I spit on your clothes', Pandu shouts in a desperate, last-ditch attempt to conserve his ethical identity before he runs out of the house into his death as son-child.

For a feminist reader hitherto secured in her well-made upper-caste world, the story is epiphanic. It eases open and displays a totally different logic to a violence that has hitherto been described to her only in terms that distance and repudiate it as—and I can think of no better example than the comment by the celebrated playwright Vijay Tendulkar cited in his foreword to Bagul's book—'uneducated, uncultured, abnormal'. It is a logic that (i) implicates both her and her world anew, since it replaces the mark of this extradited 'other' on the many institutions, familial, psychic, ethical, that ground her personal, and therefore as a feminist also her political, life and (ii) renews her understanding of patriarchy and the subjugations that structure and sustain it.

For the widow-mother protagonist—and for the Dalit feminist—nothing comes so easily, yet there is in the story the stirring of a new kind of movement: from the never ceasing shuttle between the extraditions and deaths that comprise her impossible life, to a struggle to leave, and in that single act to re-notate the world. It is a movement, not so much to demand entry into the many temples of the contemporary world, but to re-designate and rework those institutions. The beginnings of a movement, possibly, from Untouchable-Harijan to Dalit.

But what exactly is untouchability in this Dalit story? I think it is significant that Baburao Bagul refers to each of the interpretative frameworks that address the caste question, but takes issue with all of them. Thus, both

varnashramadharma (and untouchability as it is configured in that brahminical-colonial-Gandhian scheme of scholarship and politics) and Sanskritisation (Indian sociology's attempt to modernise brahminism by transforming it into a question of consent and aspiration and not bigotry or exploitation) are noted emblematically. It is easy to provide examples: the Hindu (?) widow is the central figure, the move from the village to the city sets the plot in motion, the narrative opens with the child's desire for a mother who is a *Vatsalya Sindhu*. 'Don't touch Pandu, any of you,' Kishan yells out. The question of consent—more specifically the question of what exactly constitutes consent for a subject that stands thus, askew, in the grids of citizenship—is thematic in this story which might well be read as an extended discussion of the dynamics of that single issue. However, in the citation-re-theorisation occasioned by this story each of these classical objects of political theory are so transformed that they are virtually, yet not totally, unrecognisable.

In contrast, the question of political economy is addressed, and its effects insistently documented. We are told that the children in the community are backward and ill-nourished, the family immiserated, the father tubercular and jobless, the mother slaves at a construction site for the pittance that will put a meal a day into their bellies, lower-caste women live in constant fear of sexual attack, the unemployed hang around the *basti*, drunk and depressed, or move around in lumpen-rowdy gangs. Here too the objects are emblematic, but they are recognisable as those of a Nehruvian/socialist scheme of things. Structurally however, the narrative accords neither political economy nor history the status of an interpretative horizon. Work, wages, property, expropriation all figure here, as does the aspiration for a wholesome humanity. But they are drawn into a frame that re-works the discursive logic of untouchability as it proposes a theory of caste (i) as

extraditions that are revised and renewed by a brahminism that is constantly updating its patriarchy; (ii) as desire in the scene of the family; and (iii) as bodies that are compelled by, but disallowed contract into the feminine or masculine; bodies, therefore, that shuttle, always deficient, always in excess. In brief, as terror in the domain of the citizen-subject.[...]

SECULARISM, MODERNITY, NATION

*Epistemology of the Dalit Critique**

ADITYA NIGAM

We have seen in the last two decades, but more specifically since the anti-Mandal agitation, how the entire upper-caste discourse, by speaking the language of 'merit', 'efficiency' and even 'class' and 'economic deprivation', successfully repressed the category of caste. The unspeakability of caste, I will argue, however, was not simply a matter of the casteism of the upper castes; it was also a result of the modernist discomfort with non-secular and 'retrograde' categories that really provided the overarching rationale within which the discourse of the upper castes took shape. In the recent past, however, especially in the post-Mandal Commission period, the secularist has discovered the 'secularity' of 'caste', particularly of the Dalit movement. The fact that it was the irreducibility of caste divisions that actually turned out to be the rock against which the project of Hindutva seemed to flounder, made the category of caste respectable. The problem, however, is that while gestures towards the 'radical and secular' potential of caste are routinely made by the secularists, there has been little attempt to theorise the question of caste and its possible 'secularity'. It was backward and retrograde when the hegemony of secular-nationalism was unchallenged; it is radical and secular, now that bad days are here and the need for all kinds of allies is pressing. In the process, the politics of the Dalit movement is never sought to be understood on its own terms. In this essay, I will try to explore the theoretical

implications for a radical secular politics, of trying to understand the existential dilemmas of Dalit politics.[...]

[W]hy is it today that caste has suddenly become visible and more importantly, a legitimate object of left-radical discourse?... A fundamental restructuring of our vision has taken place in the last decade or more, which enables this re-visioning. And this restructuring of our cherished intellectual frameworks has been forced by developments from the outside. One of these developments, is what I will term, altering somewhat a Foucauldian expression, the insurrection of little selves. For, this insurrection of little selves marks a global crisis of modernity and its great project of realising the emancipation of Universal Man—embodied in the abstract citizen, unmarked by any identity. This project, we realise today, was meant to be achieved by erasing and repressing particular identities.

In India, this crisis has been coeval with the crisis of the nationalist imaginary and the nation-state. With this ‘insurrection of little selves’, the Dalit has emerged—not merely as the object whose history ‘we’ secular historians and scholars can now write, but as the subject who writes her own history. It is this emergence of the Dalit as the subject-object of another history—one that falls outside the reckoning of secular/nationalist historians that we must now deal with. In other words, we must begin to deal with Dalit history not as an adjunct to, or a part of, a history of nationalism and secularism, merely reiterating its supposed ‘secularity’, but as the voice that demands recognition in its own right. As I will argue later, if the early Dalit-Bahujan assertions in the personalities of Ambedkar, Periyar, Iyothee Thass, and such others, resists the incorporation into the nationalist narratives, so does the present Dalit movement resist the bid to assimilate its voice into that of secularism. If we listen attentively to the voices from within, we can hear precisely their refusal—despite heavy investments in the modern—to be willing parts of the two

great artefacts of our modernity, namely, secularism and the nation. I will, therefore, argue that, belonging as it does to this instance of crisis, both the manner and the moment of the emergence of the new Dalit assertion, direct us to read it as a critique of modernity.

This may sound strange because in the entire manifest discourse of the leaders of the Dalit and more generally, non-Brahmin leaders, modernity appears as the liberator from the tyranny of the past brahminical order. The task that I seek to undertake in the rest of the essay then, is to read the Dalit movement and its discourse as a text, against its own self-perception, in order to extricate the elements of an epistemology of its critique of modernity.

DALITS AND OTHERS

The decade of the 1980s, I have argued elsewhere, saw the appearance of the first ruptures in the secular-nationalist discourse that had emerged out of the freedom struggle. For the first time, the overarching 'Indian' identity gives way during this period, to innumerable smaller, 'fragmented' identities. We have seen that at least four major strands can be discerned in this series of developments: (a) Subnational assertions for movements of autonomy and occasionally, the desire for secession; (b) Struggles around gender oppression, especially dowry, custodial rape, sati, etc.; (c) Ecological movements centring on the displacement of people by mega-development projects and the question of local access to and control over natural resources and finally; (d) The coming to the fore of issues of caste oppression in the north (Nigam 1996). The backlash to the implementation of backward caste reservations by the Karpoori Thakur government in Bihar and the massive anti-reservation riots, directed against the Dalits in Gujarat in 1981, were the early signs of what was to burst forth in the post-Mandal phase, as far

as caste conflict was concerned. These developments actually represented the unravelling of the structure of nationhood that had been laboriously built over the years of the national movement and given further shape in the Constituent Assembly.

It is true that a 'critique of the concrete Indian nation, however, need not be a critique of the category of nation as such' (Pandian 1998). A number of these assertions, therefore, continued to imagine themselves in the nation-form, though the entity whose nation-form was now sought was no longer Indian in many cases—it was Assamese, Khalistani, Gorkha, etc. Though, the very dispersal of the community often made such imaginings impossible and reflected itself in imagining India differently. The fact, however, remains that deep inside, these diverse movements reflected a dissatisfaction with the large homogenising, concrete discourse of nationhood that had submerged their specific cultures.

From the Dalit or the Dalit-bahujan standpoint this moment of rupture has been seen as unprecedentedly liberatory. I am aware that clearly there are problems with the attempt to unite all the disparate groups into a single entity called the Dalit-bahujan—especially from certain sections of the Dalits. However, for the purposes of this essay, I will not dwell on these different strands within the movement and treat the Dalit-bahujan discourse as one.¹ In these articulations, the period since the 1980s but more specifically, the post-Mandal (1990) phase has been seen as the 'turning point'. Before I go into the critique, it may be necessary to recall the common sense, as well as the self-perception of the Dalit relationship to modernity (and colonial rule), in order to make my point clearer.

It is by now common sense that there has been a considerable investment in modernity and its emancipatory promise among the Dalits and more generally, among the

many non-brahmin castes. To the extent that modernity in India is historically a product of the colonial encounter, this extends to a positive assessment of colonial rule. As V. Geetha and S. V. Rajadurai note, it was the availability of the language of rights and the secularisation of public space, thanks to western education and the modern processes unleashed by British rule, that provided the main ingredients of the emancipatory struggle of the non-brahmin and the Adi-Dravidas (the Dalits).

If the declaration of certain spaces as public rendered them open and free in terms of approach and use to subaltern groups, a language of rights, which western education and an acquaintance with political liberalism had provoked into existence, came to structure and direct subaltern aspirations for equality and justice. (Geetha and Rajadurai 1998)

In fact, British presence meant something more. It was seen as a kind of Bonapartist regime that could balance different interests and provide the much needed space to non-brahmin and Dalit existence. As the *Non-Brahmin Manifesto*, issued in December 1916, observed, it was the British alone who could 'hold the scales even between creed and class and ... develop that sense of solidarity and unity without which India will continue to be a group of mutually exclusive warring groups without common purpose and common patriotism' (Geetha and Ravindran 1998).

Industrialisation and modern education continue to be seen as liberators of the oppressed Dalit communities and the social space of the city as the place of freedom. Chandra Bhan Prasad, a leading Dalit intellectual, for instance, in a highly symptomatic series of articles, also assesses the coming of the British as 'having made a difference' in this respect, with the following words:

British arrival coincided with the particular era when societies the world over were emancipating themselves from the medieval social systems. The emergence of urban civilisation was a great phenomenon, which made medieval institutions redundant worldwide. Emergence of urban civilisation was intrinsically interwoven with inventions of modern tools, scientific discoveries, spread of modern education, in other words, industrial revolution, with which were associated the notions of liberty, freedom and democracy. (Prasad 1999, I have quoted from an unpublished version of the same article). [...]

Yet, there is something amiss in this eulogy to the modern. A relentless resistance to the idea of abstract citizenship, the insistence on what was called 'communal proportional representation' is inscribed in the very heart of Dalit and non-brahmin politics from its very inception. The almost life-and-death contestations that took place around this issue and which unrepentant modernists like Nehru and Namboodiripad found so embarrassing, and which eventually found their embodiment in the Indian Constitution, points to the need to examine afresh the various layers of this relationship between the Dalits and modernity. There are other compelling reasons why this exercise needs to be undertaken. For, 200 years of modern development and four decades of Independence later, the struggle of the Dalits had to begin afresh in very different circumstances.... For the purposes of this essay, I take one of the best articulated [instances of these new] critiques, 'Towards the Dalitisation of the Nation', by Kancha Ilaiah (1998)....

THE NEW DALIT CRITIQUE

Ilaiah distinguishes between three schools of thought in the anti-colonial struggle, namely: (a) Dalit-bahujan nationalism

represented by Jotirao Phule, B. R. Ambedkar and Periyar; (b) Hindu nationalism represented by Tilak, Mahatma Gandhi (and in the second essay, he includes in this 'epistemological current', characters as diverse as Rammohun Roy, Nehru, Golwalkar and S. P. Mookerjee; and (c) the brahminical communist nationalism represented by P. C. Joshi and S. A. Dange (in the second essay, this list includes, M. N. Roy, R. P. Dutt, T. Nagi Reddy and E. M. S. Namboodiripad and there it is referred to as the 'secular socialist nationalism that was caste-blind') (Ilaiah 1998: 268-69; 1999: 19). A footnote in the latter essay further comments on the secular, communist stream, saying: 'All of them came from upper caste and upper class backgrounds. In all their writings, Hinduism and Brahminism were never critiqued' (Ilaiah 1999). This three-fold distinction is important for it reveals some of the inner tensions of nationalism, even if it presents it as a singular entity, subsuming the Dalit-bahujan current as just another 'nationalism' and ignores some other currents like the Muslims. It is also important for what it has to say of the communists—a point I shall return to soon. [...]

The interesting thing about this perception is that it sees the Gandhian Hindu religious discourse as flowing seamlessly into what took shape as the Nehruvian state—Nehru's own discomfort and embarrassment with Gandhian 'sentimentality and religiosity' notwithstanding. It is also interesting that Ilaiah sees the process of the secular state becoming the 'private property of the brahminical castes' as a conscious act of the Nehruvian state elite, not as an unintended by-product of its working. Finally, his perception that the entry of the Dalit-bahujans even through reservations, was seen as the degeneration of the system, points to the continuing embarrassment of the Nehruvian/modern elites with the idea of recognising caste. How do we understand this critique? One possible way of reading it would be to do so straight off, in its most

manifest sense. But for such a reading to make sense, one would either have to fall back on an essentialisation of caste identity that remains unchanged through the great changes that modernity was expected to and did bring in its train. Alternatively, we would have to resort to a conspiracy theory of history and see the entire story of our modernity and of postcolonial India as the outcome of such a conspiracy. D. R. Nagaraj (1993), for instance, refers to it as 'the treacherous deal that was struck between the forces of modernity and the caste system'. His is of course a very sophisticated rendering of the idea and he comes very close to anticipating what I think is the crux of the problem. So, he goes on to suggest that 'the Shudra thinkers were accurate and insightful in laying bare the strategies of oppression practiced by traditional society, but they were naive in their optimistic support to agents and practices of modernity' (Nagaraj 1993). His reference to the 'naivete' in investing their 'optimistic support' in modernity actually points to the need for an investigation into the discourses and processes of modernity. However, here Nagaraj disappoints us and notwithstanding his own suggestion, still continues to see the problem as one of upper-caste conspiracy alone.

To continue with Ilaiah's critique, he goes on to argue that the 'Nehruvian state was not a secular agency because in its everyday practices in the offices, brahminism alone was constructed as meritorious, and it alone was shown to be India's salvation' (Ilaiah 1998: 275). His critique then makes the most amazing move of distinguishing between two different modernities in India: the Hindu nationalist—or what we may understand as official—modernity and the 'indigenous modernity' of the proto-scientific practices of the Dalit-bahujans and women, always ever innovating in the course of their productive work (ibid.: 276). This operation of bifurcating high modernity and separating it from the 'low' already problematises modernity whose

project has only been homogenisation, and standardisation of the cultures/knowledges through erasure and silencing of such low cultures. Ilaiah then goes on to elaborate that high modernity came to its own with the 'feudal brahmins' selling away their landed properties and coming to occupy the position of the urban middle class. Through its control over the English language, this class came to control the state sector and finally, 'it was in the cities that the nexus between the twiceborn castes (brahmins and banias) was consolidated' (ibid.: 280). Thus was shattered the 'dream of the city' that was the fulcrum of the Dalit's attachment to modernity.

Politically, what is most galling, however, is that with the emergence of the Hindutva challenge, came the re-imposition of the kind of binarism that was reminiscent of the national movement.... Once the opposition was set in place, any political stance could only be understood if it made sense in the terms set by this discourse. Often the struggle between the dalits and the neo-brahmins in the countryside—or the neo-Kshatriyas as Ilaiah calls them, namely the dominant OBCs—forced a different kind of logic of alliances. Seen in the dichotomous world of 'secularism vs communalism', the BSP's alliance with the BJP in UP, however, shortlived could only be understood as opportunism. Ilaiah, later in the essay comes closer to spelling this out:

The so-called secular upper castes, again in order to undermine the Mandalisation process, organised a discourse around secularism vs communalism. In this, the "upper" castes working under various shades of ideologies—the socialist, Communist, liberal democratic forces of the Congress variety ... were very active.... The leading role was, however, taken by the brahminical Communists. (Ilaiah 1998: 285)

Lest this be seen as idiosyncratic, let us quote from the article by Chandra Bhan Prasad mentioned: ‘Once again when the question of social transformation is being raised, we are being told we must join the “secular brigade” to defeat “communal fascism”, and probably they mean that the social questions can be tackled later’ (Prasad 1999).

FISSURED MODERNITY AND PROTEAN SELF²

Let us try to make sense of Ilaiah’s discussion (which as I have indicated, is shared by at least some other important Dalit-bahujan writers) above of the seamless flow of Gandhian anti-modern Hindu religious nationalism into the structuring of Nehruvian modernity and his explication of the shattering of the dream of the city. How do we understand this transformation or explain this perception, if we do not take recourse to either option—that of cultural essentialism or that of a conspiracy theory of history?

Here I wish to refer to a slippage in Ilaiah’s reading of the situation that occurs in his attribution to the Nehruvian postcolonial state what was in fact an already inherited condition. In his important work, *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables*, published in 1945, Ambedkar, for example, discusses the nature of what he calls the governing class—clearly in the colonial context. He has no doubt that the brahmins are the governing class. There are two reasons for thinking so. The first is their cultural hegemony or what he calls the ‘sentiment of the people’. He explains this through, among others, the instance of Malabar, ‘where Sambandham marriages prevail’ among the ‘the servile classes such as the Nairs’, who ‘regard it an honour to have their females kept as mistresses by Brahmins to deflower their queens on prima noctis’ (Moon 1991: 205). The second test ‘is the control of the administration’. He then goes on to provide statistical data of the communitywise distribution of gazetted posts in

the year 1943 in Madras Presidency to show the preponderance of brahmins—especially in the more highly paid ones.... Ambedkar, in fact, went further to compile the information on Congress victories in the 1937 elections: ... 'In all the Hindu provinces, the prime ministers were brahmins. In all Hindu provinces if the non-Hindu ministers were excluded, the cabinets were wholly composed of brahmins' (Moon 1991).[...]

Like Ambedkar, E. V. Ramasamy Naicker 'Periyar' too was concerned with the new power being acquired by the brahmin in the modern secular realm.[...] [V. Geetha and S. V. Rajdurai draw] attention to what they call Periyar's reading of the protean brahmin sensibility. 'He remarked on several occasions that the brahmins retained their privileges by remaining open to change and by adopting a winning flexibility.' One of his statements in this regard is particularly striking:

Rajaji will eat at a panchama's house; Shankaracharya will bathe on seeing a panchama; some others will bathe if a panchama's shadow falls on them, others if a panchama touches them. Yet others will marry a panchama man or woman—but all of them will still remain brahmanas. Brahmin orthodoxy in 1940 was of a different kind than what obtained in 1900. After 1940 this orthodoxy changed form again. (Geetha and Rajadurai 1998: 317)

It is remarkable that Periyar is constantly alert not only to the extreme flexibility of the brahmin self, he is also alluding here to the two different realms—one occupied and represented by Rajaji and the other by Shankaracharya. In Rajaji's realm, the changes taking place, I believe were such that the brahmin was not only negotiating the challenges brought in by the processes of the modern, but also recasting the brahmin self in crucial ways. Many brahmins remained brahmins but many of

them had seriously started believing that Hindu society needed to be modernised and freed of the blot of caste distinctions. The route taken for this was nationalism—the new imagination of a homogenous Hindu society as the centrepiece of the emergent Indian nation. The problem was that even then they wanted this change on their own terms, that is, without relinquishing their new and emerging power in the secular realm.[...]

The modern/non-modern or modern/traditional dichotomy often seems to blind us to the complexity of the very processes of articulation of the traditional and the modern. Seen thus, it was probably, not the kinship between Gandhian traditionalism and Nehruvian modernity, as Kancha Ilaiah suggests, but the very forms of articulation of the modern with the traditional that laid the foundations of the Nehruvian state's slide into a domination of the brahminical upper castes over the modern state institutions. It is probably more likely that already by the turn of the century neither sector was purely 'traditional' or 'modern'. It may be more useful to see what appear to be two aspects—that of the breakdown of the old order and the insertion into the new, necessarily hybrid modernity—as constituting a single moment.³ It was not as if the processes of modernity ushered in by the colonial encounter were simply destroying the hold of caste hierarchies and bringing in the new world of modern development, industrialisation and a regime of rights and citizenship. Rather, the old was 'always already' present in the new but no longer in the old form. At one level this can sound like a moth-eaten truism. After all, a Marxist dialectician can always claim that the notion of *Aufhebung* is at once the preservation of the old in the new and its transcendence. Yet, Marxist historiography and scholarship on India has precisely seen this in the dichotomous terms of the so-called 'dual role' of colonialism—the destruction

of the traditional and the initiation of the modern. The categories have remained as dichotomised as in many other writings of the modernisation theorists. What I want to suggest here is somewhat different. In suggesting that the 'two aspects' be considered as a single moment, I wish to draw attention to the fact that the very process by which the political category of the 'brahmin' became available to the non-brahmin movement, thanks to the discourse of equality and rights, was also the process by which the brahmin power was instituted in the secular-modern realm.⁴ By the time it thus became possible to challenge the brahmin's oppression he had already mutated into something else. This new power accrued to him now because he had the advantages of English education, rather than because of his ritual superiority.

There are at least two ways in which this can be understood. If it is true that the brahmin in colonial India was already a different being, we can see one face of his existence, as Periyar did, in the brahmin whose infinitely malleable and 'protean' self saw the opportunities offered by colonial rule and quickly adapted itself to the new dispensation. This brahmin deftly appropriated the public/private distinction to his convenience and 'privatised' caste identity by becoming secular in the public realm and a believer in the private. Within his 'inner' domain, he continued to be a casteist, even to the extent of continuing to practice untouchability. But there was another face—that of the mutated 'nationalist' whose nationalism, like Savarkar's, was modern to the core, but which demanded the subordination of all questions of internal reform of the Hindu society to the fight for independence. Such was also the face of the brahmins of the secular anti-imperialist nationalists like Nehru and the communists, though unlike Savarkar and Tilak or Sardar Patel, theirs was a more inclusive nationalism. In a

different way then, this mutated upper-caste self became willy-nilly, a party to suppression of the urge for Dalit liberation.

The problem with the pervasive sociologicistic understanding of the category of the 'upper caste' (or caste in general) is that it can only fall back on the formal nomenclature thus misrecognising the function it begins to perform in the changed context. Let me make this a bit more explicit by trying to break down the category of the 'urban upper caste self' by interrogating the most problematic aspect of it—the notion of the 'brahminical marxist'. We may begin with Kanshi Ram's colourful metaphor regarding the communists: that they are 'green snakes in green grass' (Ilaiyah 1999: 41). This metaphor leads us straight to the deep-rooted anti-communism within one important strand of the Dalit movement—right from the days of Ambedkar. Why this anti-communism came to be so strong among the most oppressed sections of Indian society is a question that has never been sufficiently posed by the secular, radical or communist scholars. From the side of the Dalits too, at best there has been a gesturing towards the upper-caste character of the Indian communists, but that is precisely the kind of sociologism that has become an uninterrogated common sense, which falls back on the essentialism that I seek to question.

The second part of Kanshi Ram's metaphor regarding the upper castes in other parties like the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), provides a cue that can be productively followed up. These upper castes are, according to him like 'white snakes in green grass'. In other words, the difference between the upper castes in other parties and those in the communist parties is that the latter are more difficult to identify. The radicalism of the communists makes 'them' indistinguishable from 'us'. This indistinguishability in itself may not have been a problem and the entire Dalit movement could have moved over to

Marxism if it had seen its liberation as being possible there. 'Indigenism' was hardly a consideration for them and with the Marxists' celebration of modern civilisation and technology, there should have been even less of a distance. What actually prevented such a possibility was the fact that already Indian Marxism had exposed itself as being insensitive and blind to Dalit oppression, operating within a framework that was most comfortable for the brahminical mind. Why this was so is precisely the issue that concerns us here and calls for further investigation.

In the first bursts of Dalit/bahujan assertion, in the early years of this century, there was probably an important factor at work: what was at issue was a radical definition of the self, an assertion of Dalit subjectivity. This self had to be, of necessity, defined in radical alterity to its brahminical other. For the Dalit to be able to speak its lived experience, it had to speak in terms of brahminism. Marxism, on the other hand, in its reduction of all oppressions to class, tended to do violence to that enterprise of self-definition. The absolute prioritisation of 'class' made caste oppression unspeakable. Further, the Dalit enterprise of self-definition was predicated on another, quintessentially modern—project, a search for Dalit history. Marxism's rendering of history, its claim to be the sole agent of that history and its privileging of the anti-imperialist struggle over all others (in the name of history) was likely to be much more irksome, given the fact that it, in effect, proposed what the 'brahminical', Hindu nationalists wanted, although in a language that was irritatingly close to that of the Dalit-bahujan leaders. In fact, Ambedkar's turn towards Buddhism and his production of a whole new narrative of Indian history as one of struggle between Buddhism and brahminism, was I believe an ingenious attempt at instituting as cultural memory, a new historical discourse. By doing this Ambedkar was producing a modernist, rational-historical narrative while at the same time, filling

up what had been a major blank, an absence, the denial of a past to the Dalit. To be able to speak of the past in the language of history and modern subjectivity was the task at hand. If this was the magnitude of the task being undertaken by Ambedkar, he could scarcely afford a resort to abstract universal history. And abstract universal history may have seemed to him to be a means of forgetting rather than recalling. I would, in fact, suggest that the reason why many individuals from the privileged upper castes took shelter in 'universal history' was that by dissolving the specificities of particular experiences, it probably helped him/her to forget his/her 'shameful past' as oppressor or person of privilege. Class oppression was universal and we also had it—there was nothing shameful about it. But to accept that 'untouchability' was also a heritage of our past, was something the modern mind found difficult to deal with.⁵ [...]

To understand this upper-caste-ness as mere brahminism in a sociologicistic fashion is to imply that they are incomplete moderns. It is to imply that this lack can be overcome by more of the same medicine. On the other hand, to understand this as the way the universalism of modernity took root in our conditions—in some ways analogous to that in the West, where it has constructed the dominant culture as norm—is to problematise the specific trajectory of modernity in our context and thus open up the possibility of emancipation and of the recovery of lost voices in the new dispensation. We need to recognise that notwithstanding this feature of the universal modern, it remained a 'secular' modernity. In fact, this is precisely what the contemporary crisis of modernity seems to be all about. The insurrection of little selves globally, is precisely a challenge to that universalising aspiration of modernity that, in its bid to standardise and homogenise and to create the 'universal man' (the abstract citizen) actually ended up

presenting European culture as the norm. Universalism is the privilege of the dominant, in the contemporary world. For it to be able to see what is not dominant, it has to be fissured. Only then does it become possible for us to see this protean modern self—the self which is a mutant of the old but is still, irreducibly new. The ‘treacherous deal’ that Nagaraj talks of cannot, therefore, be understood as a mere conspiracy between the upper castes and modernity. However, it is a problem of the universalising tendency of modernity that it is destined to run up against the subversive deployments of its own discourses of rights and equality—thus opening up such fissures and breaches on its front.[...]

ONE STEP OUTSIDE MODERNITY

*Caste, Identity Politics and Public Sphere**

M. S. S. PANDIAN

The autobiography of R. K. Narayan, the well-known Indian writer in English, is perhaps a useful place to begin one's explorations into the complex interrelationship between caste, identity politics and the public sphere. When I read it recently, one of the things that struck me the most was how Narayan, whose fictional world dealt substantially with the life of rural and small town south India, was almost completely silent about his caste identity. [...]

The subtle act of transcoding caste and caste relations into something else—as though to talk about caste as caste would incarcerate one into a pre-modern realm—is a regular feature one finds in most upper-caste autobiographies. Caste always belongs to someone else; it is somewhere else; it is of another time. The act of transcoding is an act of acknowledging and disavowing caste at once.

In marked contrast to the upper-caste autobiographies, the self-definition of one's identity, as found in the autobiographies of the lower castes, is located explicitly in caste as a relational identity. The autobiographical renditions of Bhama or Viramma, two Dalit women from the Tamil-speaking region, the poignant autobiographical fragments of Dalits from Maharashtra, put together by Arjun Dangle in his edited volume *Corpse in the Well*, and Vasant Moon's *Growing up Untouchable in India*, are all suffused with the language of caste—at times mutinous, at

times moving (Bhama 1994; Viramma et al. 1997; Dangle 1994; Moon 2001). Most often the very act of writing an autobiography for a person belonging to a lower caste is to talk about and engage with the issue of caste.¹

In other words, we have here two competing sets of languages dealing with the issue of caste. One talks of caste by other means; and the other talks of caste on its 'own terms'. My attempt in the rest of the essay is to understand the implication of these two sets of languages for the play of identities in the public sphere under the long shadow of modernity.

II

A COLONIAL STORY

First, let us have a look at the historical conditions that facilitated and made possible these two competing modes of talking about castes. This straightaway takes us to the domain of culture as articulated by dominant Indian nationalism, in its battle against colonialism. In an influential formulation, Partha Chatterjee has argued that anti-colonial nationalism marks out the domain of culture or spirituality as 'its own domain of sovereignty within colonial society well before it begins its political battle with the imperial power' (Chatterjee 1995 [1993]: 7). As Chatterjee shows, in the discourse of nationalism, 'The greater one's success in imitating western skills in the material domain, ... the greater the need to preserve the distinctness of one's spiritual culture' (ibid.)....

While I agree with the new possibilities opened up by Chatterjee's argument about nationalism in the colonial context, if we pluralise 'national community' and 'national culture', the obvious triumph of dominant nationalism over colonialism would at once emerge as a story of domination over varied sections of the subaltern social groups within the nation. In other words, if we foreground dominant

nationalism in an oppositional dialogue with the subaltern social groups within the nation—instead of colonialism—the divide between the spiritual and material, inner and outer, would tell us other stories—stories of domination and exclusion under the sign of culture and spirituality within the so-called national community itself. That is, the very domain of sovereignty that nationalism carves out in the face of colonial domination is simultaneously a domain of enforcing domination over the subaltern social groups such as lower castes, women and marginal linguistic regions, by the national elite.... [W]hat we find is a valorised opposition between colonialism and nationalism. The nationalist invocation of Vedic civilisation indeed challenges the claims to supremacy by the colonisers. However, it also carries an unstated hierarchisation of different social groups that go to make the nation. The normativity of a Vedic civilisation, re-invented by dominant nationalism, would accommodate vast sections of Indians only as inferiors within the nation.² It is not so much the triumph of non-modular nationalism over colonialism, but its inability to exercise hegemony over the life of the nation, is where we can locate the source of two competing modes of speaking caste.[...]

[E]lite Indian nationalism scripted the story by working through the binaries of spiritual/material, inner/outer and valorising the inner or spiritual as the uncolonised site of national selfhood. But it had a less triumphal implication for the subaltern classes.[...]

Simultaneously, the so-called sovereign domain of culture uncolonised by the West remained a domain to affirm elite upper-caste culture/spirituality as the culture of the nation. We have already seen this through the instance of Sivaswami Aiyer's spirituality. This act of mobilising a part of the national to stand for the whole, not only inferiorised vast sections of lower castes as inadequate citizens-in-themaking,³ but also significantly *delegitimised the*

language of caste in the domain of politics by annexing it as part of the cultural. It is only by unsettling the boundaries between the spiritual and material, inner and outer, could the lower castes (and women) contest the logic of exclusion inherent in the so-called national culture and talk caste in the colonial public sphere.

The intersection between the act of unsettling the boundary between spiritual and material, and the efforts of dominant nationalism to enforce this very boundary is the point at which we can trace the arrival of the two modes of talking about caste which I have mentioned earlier. In fact, much of the politics of Periyar E. V. Ramasamy or Babasaheb Ambedkar can be read as an effort to unsettle the boundary between the spiritual and the material, and recover a space for the language of caste in the colonial public sphere. However, it is a far more interesting story how the mainstream nationalists, in confronting this language of caste in the domain of politics, responded to it.

In 1933, the municipality of Pollachi, a small town in western Tamil Nadu, introduced a regulation to do away with the separate dining spaces marked out for the Brahmins and the non-Brahmins in hotels. Sivaswami Aiyer opposed the move by claiming that it was interference in personal matters (*Gandhi* 1933). Here is an obvious story of pushing back caste into the inner domain of culture. But most often, caste, once brought into the public domain, refused to heed such nationalist advice. It stayed on, speaking its own language, though from marginal and stigmatised spaces.

In the face of such stubbornness, caste often gets written out as a part of the colonial strategy of 'divide and rule' and, thus, its invocation in the domain of politics stigmatised. The story of how the nationalisms of E. V. Ramasamy and Ambedkar are suspect even today; and how they, in the dominant nationalist thinking, remain as

‘collaborators’ with the British, would illustrate this.⁴ At another level, caste gets transcoded as a modern institution in an effort to shut out the language of caste from the public sphere. Let me take the case of untouchability. There was an avalanche of publications in the first half of the twentieth century, which explained away untouchability by resorting to a discourse of hygiene. P. V. Jagadisa Aiyyer, whose monograph *South Indian Customs*, published originally in 1925 but in print even today, has the following to say:

The Indian custom of observing distance pollution, etc., has hygienic and sanitary considerations in view. In general the so-called pious and religious people are generally most scrupulously clean and hence contact with people of uncleanly habits is nauseating to them ... people living on unwholesome food such as rotten fish, flesh, garlic, etc., as well as the people of filthy and unclean habits throw out of their bodies coarse and unhealthy magnetism. This affects the religious people of pure habits and diet injuriously. So they keep themselves at a safe distance which has been fixed by the sages of old after sufficient experience and experiment. (Aiyyar 1985[1925]: ix)

This quote is interesting on several counts. There is not a moment when it acknowledges caste. The upper castes, on the one hand, get encoded here as ‘so-called pious and religious people’ or as ‘religious people of pure habits’. The lower castes, on the other, are encoded as ‘people living on rotten fish, flesh, garlic, etc’. Fish, flesh and garlic—all are tabooed in the world of the brahmin and certain other upper castes. Interestingly, Jagadisa Aiyyer does not invoke merely experience, but experimentation as well. The authority of experimentation summons science to validate caste pollution.⁵

In other contexts, caste, in the hands of the upper castes and dominant nationalists, reincarnates as division of labour. Though one can easily provide several instances to illustrate this, let me just confine my self to one. In an editorial, appropriately titled 'How Caste Helps', *New India*, the journal of the Theosophical Society edited by Annie Besant, noted, 'However much we may declaim against the thralldom of caste in details, the fundamental four divisions of men are so much part of the natural order of things that they will remain as long as servants and traders and soldiers and teachers perform their duties amongst us.' It further added, '... caste in itself is not peculiar to India, but is found everywhere. Servers, merchants fighters and rulers, priests, every people has them, though the name is different according to the nation' (*New India* 58 [77] 1916). Here, Annie Besant, a vociferous defender of brahminism, who tried her best to wreck the non-brahmin political mobilisation in colonial Madras Presidency, naturalises caste. In doing so, she assimilates caste as part of a universal structure of division of labour and denies it any socio-historical specificity. Both the acts of naturalising caste and denying it any specificity, work in tandem to invalidate caste as a relevant category in public sphere and politics.

In tracing the historical moment of the arrival of two modes of talking about caste in the Indian public sphere, as it unfolded in the womb of colonialism, let me emphasise two key points: first, the very nationalist resolution founded on the divide between spiritual and material rendered the mode of talking caste on its own terms in the material/public sphere, an illegitimate project. Two, its response to those who still chose the language of caste in the domain of politics by crossing the divide between the spiritual and material is one of mobilising modernity (hygiene and division of labour as instances we have seen)

and nation to inscribe the language of caste as once again illegitimate.

The intimacy between modernity and the desire to keep caste out of the public sphere had its own particular career in postcolonial India, to which now I turn.

III

POSTCOLONIAL ANGST

With the end of colonial rule, the ambivalence towards the modern exhibited by the Indian nationalist elite during the colonial period withered. Now it is modernity on the terms of the 'nation' itself. The character of this new journey along the path of the modern by the Indian nation-state has been captured by Partha Chatterjee in the following words: 'The modern state, embedded as it is within the universal narrative of capital, cannot recognise within its jurisdiction any form of community except the single, determinate, demographically enumerable form of the nation' (Chatterjee 1995 [1993]: 238). However, it is important here to recognise that this very opposition between the state (and/or capital) and the community would make community indispensable for the articulation of the nation. After all, only by recognising the presence of communities can the nation-state deny their legitimacy and affirm the nation. This simultaneous inseparability and antagonism between the modern state and community is of critical importance to understand the politics of two modes of talking caste in postcolonial India.⁶

In exploring this connection between modernity and caste in postcolonial India, the writings of M. N. Srinivas, who was committed at once to the developmental state and sociology,⁷ is most helpful. Let us have a look at his much-hyped theory of Sanskritisation and westernisation. Stripped down to its basics, the theory, within a comparative framework, claims that the lower castes

Sanskritise and the upper castes westernise (Srinivas 1972). Taking a cue from Johannes Fabian's argument about how the West constructs its 'other' by 'the denial of coevalness' (Fabian 1983),⁸ we can immediately locate a teleological scheme within Srinivas's comparative analysis. The teleology moves from lower-caste practices to Sanskritisation to westernisation. This very teleology sets caste as the 'other' of the modern.

But we need to remember here that what looks here like the unmarked modern is stealthily upper caste in its orientation. What M. N. Srinivas offers us as the history of westernisation in India is eminently instructive here. He writes:

Only a tiny fraction of the Indian population came into direct, fact-to-face contact with the British or other Europeans, and those who came into such contact did not always become a force for change. Indian servants of the British, for instance, probably wielded some influence among their kin groups and local caste groups but not among others. They generally came from the low castes, their westernisation was of a superficial kind, and the upper castes made fun of their Pidgin English, their absurd admiration for their employers, and the airs they gave themselves. Similarly, converts to Christianity from Hinduism did not exercise much influence as a whole because first, these also came from the low castes, and second, the act of conversion often only changed the faith but not the customs, the general culture, or the standing of the converts in society. (Srinivas 1972: 60)

Very clearly, for M. N. Srinivas, the source of the Indian modern cannot be the lower castes. Their attempts could only remain superficial trapped in pidgin English and absurd admiration for their employers.[...]

It is evident that Indian modern, despite its claim to be universal—and of course, because of it—not only

constitutes lower caste as its 'other', but also inscribes itself silently as upper caste. Thus, caste, as the other of the modern, always belongs to the lower castes.⁹

Given this particular character of the Indian modern, it proscribes and stigmatises the language of caste in the public sphere. It does so even while it talks caste by other means. In understanding the politics of this authorised language of the public sphere, M. N. Srinivas is once again helpful. It was thanks to Edmund Leach that Srinivas, who spoke all the time about caste in general but never about his own, spoke of his caste identity. In a review of Srinivas's *Caste in Modern India*, Leach called his Sanskritisation model 'Brahminocentric' and taunted him whether his interpretation would have been different if he were a Shudra (Srinivas 1972: 148). If the incitement of the rabid Christians and the non-brahmins occasioned R. K. Narayan's acknowledgement of his upper-caste identity, the incitement of Edmund Leach prompted Srinivas to concede his own caste identity. He claimed:

... my stressing of the importance of the Backward Classes Movement, and of the role of caste in politics and administration, are very probably the result of my being a south Indian, and a brahmin at that. The principle of caste quotas for appointments to posts in the administration, and for admissions to scientific and technological courses, produced much bitterness among Mysore brahmins. Some of these were my friends and relatives, and I could not help being sensitive to their distress. (Ibid.: 152)

This is familiar enough. Distress of the brahmin is the theme song of the post-Mandal modern public sphere of India. M. N. Srinivas, to his credit, talks of it even earlier. But what is quite illuminating here is that as soon as he confesses his caste identity (with the caveat of 'very probably'), he hastens to enfeeble it. In the place of his

sensitivity to the distress of the Mysore brahmins, now he presents a range of things that has nothing to do with caste as such, as the reason for his opposition to caste quotas. He could not help being sensitive 'to the steady deterioration in efficiency and the fouling of interpersonal relations in academic circles and the administration—both results of a policy of caste quotas. As one with a strong attachment to Mysore, I could not but be affected by the manner in which conflicts between castes prevented concentration on the all-important task of developing the economic resources of the state for the benefit of all sections of its population' (ibid.: 152–53).

Srinivas, at one level, emerges here as one of '... those 'experts' on caste who consider it their duty to protect caste from the pollution of politics' (Kothari 1986 [1970]: 6). Here is a torrent of words—'decline of efficiency', 'fouling of interpersonal relations', 'the benefit of all sections of the population'—all conspire to keep caste out of public articulation. In the heart of all of it what we find is the well-known principle of 'common good' as a civic ideal. As the feminist and other minoritarian critiques of civic republican ideal of 'common good' have shown us, the deployment of 'common good' as the so-called democratic ideal elbows out the politics of difference based on inferiorised identities and sports the interests of the powerful as that of the society as a whole. As Chantal Mouffe has argued, 'all forms of consensus are by necessity based on acts of exclusion' (1992: 379). However, this is not merely a story of interests, but of democracy and its articulation in the public sphere. The deracinated language of 'common good' comes in the way of the formation of an inclusive public sphere. The pressure exerted by the modern most often forces the subordinated castes into silence and self-hate. D. R. Nagaraj, a fellow traveller and a scholar of the Dalit movement in Karnataka, notes, 'The birth of the modern individual in the humiliated

communities is not only accompanied by a painful severing of ties with the community, but also a conscious effort to alter one's past is an integral part of it' (Nagaraj 1993: 7-8)....

The response of the Indian modern, when the insurrection of the prohibited language of caste occurs in the public sphere, would illuminate the contradictory relationship between modernity and mass politics in India. The year 1990, when V. P. Singh as the prime minister of India decided to implement a part of the Mandal Commission Report, was such a moment. As an illustration, let me take the response of Ashok Mitra, well-known Marxist and a believer in 'People's Democracy'. His modern selfhood is not in doubt at all. In a rather revealing statement, he claimed, 'The government's decision ... represents the ultimate triumph of the message of Babasaheb Ambedkar over the preachings of secularists'. Sullied by the language of caste, Ambedkar cannot be part of the secular-modern. He goes on, as a Marxist, to enumerate national ills—which are, for him, more real—such as misdistribution of arable land, near-universal illiteracy and general lack of health. Caste is, however, refused a place in his secular-modern reckoning.

Then come his ruminations about mass politics: 'For the nation's majority, the oppressive arrangements the system has spawned are little different from what obtained under medieval feudalism. With just one exception, medieval tyrants did not have to worry about votes. Modern leaders have to. They cannot therefore ignore pressure groups, who claim to speak on behalf of neglected classes or sections. These groups have to be taken at their face value for they supposedly represent solid vote banks. Revolutions are not next door, but the threat of votes withheld, or being hawked around to other bidders, works'. The simultaneous disenchantment of the Indian modern (even in its Marxist incarnation) with the language of caste as well as that of

mass politics is all too transparent here. The perceptive comment about the doctrinaire modernist made three decades back by Rajni Kothari, still holds true: 'Those who in India who complain of "casteism in politics" are really looking for a sort of politics which has no basis in society. They also probably lack any clear conception of either the nature of politics or the nature of the caste system (Many of them would want to throw out both politics and caste system)'^{[10](#)}.

In concluding this essay, let me dwell a bit on how the Indian modern's revolt against democracy has shaped the lower caste responses. In their response, the modern is both mobilised and critiqued, for the promises of modernity and what it delivers in practice are often in contradiction.... This contradictory engagement with modernity by the lower castes has an important message for all of us: That is, being one step outside modernity alone can guarantee us a public where the politics of difference can articulate itself, and caste can emerge as a legitimate category of democratic politics. Being one step outside modernity is indeed being one step ahead of modernity.

CASTE AND CASTELESSNESS

*Towards a Biography of
the 'General Category' **

SATISH DESHPANDE

Caste has been at the centre of public attention for a long time, especially in the last two decades. Despite being at the centre of our attention, caste continues to elude us in fundamental ways—or at least so it would seem. In this essay I would like to explore some of the ways in which caste has proved to be elusive, and the reasons why this has happened.[...]

[T]he central predicament of caste today is its hypervisibility for the so-called lower castes and its invisibility for the so-called upper castes. Having started out at Independence with the common goal of transcending caste—an objective that hardly anyone dared to question publicly and almost everyone seemed to share—we appear to have reached a dead-end six decades later where society is split into two unequal and implacably opposed sections. For one section, caste appears to be the only available resource with which to try and improve life-chances in a game where the playing field is far from level. This section, which constitutes the large majority of the population, includes many disparate groups that nevertheless share an interest in caste-based politics. For the other section, which is far less numerous and (relatively speaking) much more homogenous, caste-qua-caste has already yielded all that it can and represents a ladder that can now be safely kicked away. Having encashed its traditional caste-capital and converted it into modern forms of capital like property,

higher educational credentials and strongholds in lucrative professions, this section believes itself to be 'caste-less' today. Not only is there no dialogue possible between the two sides, they are trapped in a perverse relationship where each is compelled to unravel the arguments knitted by the other.

What I would like to emphasise here is the mismatch in the public perception of the two groups. The story of the political encashment of caste is often told—indeed it has dominated public discourse over the past two decades. This is a noisy and raucous account, full of the rough and tumble of political contestation, and it has also attracted ample attention from social scientists, as attested by concepts such as 'dominant caste' or 'the Congress system'. The other story—that of the 'extra-electoral' coup effected by the upper castes through the transformation of their caste capital into modern capital—is not so well known. Because it runs with the grain of the dominant common sense—which is for obvious reasons monopolised by the vocal upper-caste minority—this story is almost unseen and unheard. That is, it is seen and heard in other garbs—it appears to be a story about something *other than caste*, like the story of nation-building for example, or the story of a great and ancient tradition modernising itself. I want to suggest that one reason why caste has proved elusive is because we have not recognised the consequences of this asymmetry. While it is of course necessary to address the question of the lower castes and their demands for social justice, we will not get a grip on the contemporary complexities of this institution unless we pay close attention to its taken-for-granted side, namely the 'naturalisation' of the upper castes as the legitimate inheritors of modernity. In brief, my contention is that caste can be understood only if we pay as much attention to it when it is invisible or infra-visible as we do when it is hypervisible or ultra-visible. Whether it is represented as a

chosen goal or claimed as an actual achievement, castelessness holds the key to caste.

Therefore, my objective is to attempt an initial account—a brief biography—of the emergence and rise of the notion of castelessness and its main form of appearance in everyday life, namely the ‘general category’.... The next section of this essay examines the apparently universal goal of ‘abolishing’ or transcending caste and its many distinct strands in the decades leading up to Independence. Section 2 deals with the ways in which the constitutional ideals, legal norms and policy practices of the new republic tried to give expression to the variously understood objective of ‘abolishing’ caste. The concluding section speculates on the current and possible future trajectories of the ‘general category’.

THE PROVOCATION OF CASTE

Caste offers a paradoxical union of the overfamiliar and the poorly understood. As the unique institution that indelibly marked Indian society as fundamentally inegalitarian and therefore unfit for modernity, caste was the universal provocation. No Indian, and certainly no Indian wishing to claim modernity in any way, could remain indifferent to it. This response was pre-given by the encounter with modernity, that is to say, *something* had to be done about caste—it could not be allowed to continue ‘as is’. And this generalised urge to change caste, or to act upon it, was typically expressed by the term ‘reform’, which ‘proclaimed the existence of a community ... of the enlightened, working in harmony towards improvement and “uplift” in the life of the nation’ (Bailey 2008: 155).

However, this apparent commonality was very deceptive because of the divergence between implicit intentions and explicit rhetoric. Public statements about caste were more constrained by the normative pressures of modernity than

communitarian intentions, which could always manage to create some space for manoeuvre. What this meant in practice was that the language in which political and social programmes were expressed was far more convergent than the divergent projects that these programmes actually contained. Even when these disparate positions eventually seemed to congregate around firmer terms like 'abolition' they continued to subsume wide variations in perspective and intent.

Thus, when tracked through sites such as the Indian National Congress and its official resolutions, for example, it is clear that the public language in which caste was addressed acquired the motif of 'abolition' very late and only through a slow and reluctant process. As Ambedkar has documented in his famous tracts *What Congress and Gandhi have done to the Untouchables* and *Mr Gandhi and the Emancipation of the Untouchables*.¹ Even after talk of 'abolition' became common, it remained facile and was rarely accompanied by a concrete understanding of caste and the practical course to be followed to achieve its abolition. Moreover, caste appeared to be unique in the sense that it was the only all-encompassing institution that was slated for abolition rather than reform. The obvious comparison is with religion which, even when it admittedly harboured numerous 'social evils', could still be presented as possessing an indispensable positive residue well worth preserving. Finally, while 'everyone' had religion including the colonisers and others who were undeniably modern, caste was uniquely ours and it seemed unquestionably 'un-modern', or, indeed, anti-modern.

In this sense, therefore, when speaking of the 'abolition' of caste, reformist public rhetoric was leaning far ahead of its constituency which was still located well to the rear of the rhetoric. This ideological overhang is most clearly visible in the early stages of the campaign against caste,

namely the last quarter of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. The most prominent voices here are still those that are seeking the *reform* of caste groups qua castes....

A second set of agendas was less parochial and attempted to address the severe disabilities that the caste system imposed on the lower and especially the lowest castes. These efforts matured at the national level into the 'constructive programme' of the INC launched in 1922 soon after Gandhi's virtual takeover of the Congress. One of the major themes of this programme was the campaign against untouchability, easily the most visible and damaging practice associated with caste. However, it is important to emphasise the self-imposed limits that this programme functioned under.[...]

In short, the moral pressure faced by the institution made abolition the preferred motif for programmatic public utterances on caste. However, this apparent unanimity of purpose concealed a broad spectrum of attitudes ranging from revitalisation and rationalisation to annihilation.... In the final approach towards Independence, therefore, these varied positions tended to find expression in similar sounding phrases and slogans that were intentionally vague and imprecise. It is no surprise, then, that the Constitution-makers should have carried these ambiguities into the founding document of the new republic.

But civil society was not the only active force working on caste during this period—the colonial state too was an important actor. Indeed, an influential strand of scholarship has argued that caste as we know it today is 'a modern phenomenon, that it is, specifically, the product of an historical encounter between India and western colonial rule' (Dirks 2001: 3). Possibly the most consequential intervention of the state was its effort, via the Census of India, to enumerate caste. As has been argued by Bernard Cohn, Arjun Appadurai, Nicholas Dirks and others, the very

effort to enumerate caste led to important changes, with the institution becoming progressively more and more 'substantialised' and fixed than it had been previously. In the 1930s the enumeration question was also tied to the question of electoral politics as provincial legislatures were formed and a gradually expanding electorate was demarcated. Two events are particularly relevant from this decade, the Census of 1931 and the negotiations around separate electorates that culminated in the so-called Poona Pact of 1932....

... According to the 1931 Census, Hindus accounted for 68.2 per cent of the population of India, while Muslims made up 22.2 per cent. Given that the 'Exterior Castes' (mostly corresponding to the Depressed Classes) accounted for as much as 21.1 per cent of the Hindu population, the grant of a separate electorate to them would greatly reduce the Hindu majority (roughly to under 54 per cent). More importantly, this would be a major blow to the moral authority and hence the eventual political power of the Congress as the representative of 'India' rather than only a caste Hindu minority. While there were strong inequities marking the relationship of even the so-called 'interior castes' (or Shudras) with the twice-born minority within caste Hindus, these divisions could be papered over and prevented from emerging into the open. However, the disabilities imposed on the Depressed Classes were so severe and shocking that no amount of propaganda could hide them. Thus, the distinctness of the Untouchable castes was already an established empirical and political fact.

It is this fact that Gandhi was addressing in his negotiations over the question of separate electorates for the Depressed Classes being demanded by Ambedkar. By embarking on a pre-emptive fast-unto-death—the very first time that he had taken such a radical step—Gandhi ensured that Ambedkar would have no option but to succumb. The Poona Pact of 1932 cemented the claims of the Congress

and specifically of Gandhi to represent all of India, helping to conceal the fact that the leadership was exclusively upper caste and the even more closely guarded 'public secret' that these castes represented a very small minority of the Hindu population. The muting of caste identities was a necessary pre-condition for the construction of a Congress 'majority'—a development of immense significance in the emerging era of electoral democracy.

However, a peculiar and paradoxical twist was imparted to this by Ambedkar's vigorous championing of the untouchable cause. The Poona Pact agreed to significantly increase the guaranteed political representation for the Depressed Classes, but a very heavy price was paid for this 'concession', as Ambedkar realised only too clearly... [T]he grant of reservations reduced the Depressed Classes to the status of supplicants for whom a special concession was being made by the majority that 'owned' the nation. This effectively positioned the upper-caste minority (which was in control of the majority) as the de facto owner of the nation, with the power to grant favours to this or that subgroup. It is this mindset that has shaped upper caste common-sense on issues of caste and especially reservations. This is also the origin of the hypervisibility of the lower castes, with the untouchable castes being at the extreme end of hypervisibility. Until the eruption of the 'interior castes' in their avatar as the 'Other Backward Classes' in the Mandal conflagration of 1990, it was the Dalit upper caste axis that was central to questions of visibility and invisibility.

CASTE, CONSTITUTION AND CITIZENSHIP IN THE NEW REPUBLIC

[...] In colonial and pre-colonial India caste identities were compulsory for all—only those who renounced the world could be casteless (Burghart 1983). Nationalist efforts to

exorcise the embarrassment of caste succeeded to some extent in valorising a worldly ideal of castelessness, but they were unable, and also largely unwilling, to mount an all-out assault on caste. This ambivalence is translated into the Constitution through the inclusion of, on the one hand, the rights to equality and non-discrimination, and, on the other hand, the charge on the state to show special consideration to the STs and SCs, to socially and educationally backward classes (SEBCs), and more generally, to the 'weaker sections' of society. The two kinds of entitlement are neither equal nor symmetrical. Being a fundamental right, the right to equality and non-discrimination takes precedence and is pre-emptive—the state's duties towards the lower castes and weaker sections may be discharged only as 'permissible abridgements' of this always-already established right.

Thus, the Constitution promises to redress the injustices suffered by the SCs and STs, and also to ameliorate the disabilities and disadvantages suffered by the SEBCs, but these promises are contained in the Directive Principles of State Policy that are not justiciable. The relative weight to be attached to these principles in comparison with the Fundamental Rights may be a matter for judicial interpretation, but the pre-eminence of the latter is never in any doubt. Moreover, to keep its promises to the SCs and STs the state must first recognise them *as castes*, and this in itself is sufficient to confine such initiatives within the bounds of a benevolent exception to the prior and stronger commitment of the state to *not discriminate* among its citizens on the basis of caste.

By contrast, the biggest boon that the state grants to the upper castes is a guarantee of anonymity in caste terms. This effectively means that regardless of the extent of their past or present privileges, their caste identity can never be used directly to prohibit or limit access to any public resource. In other words, the upper castes cannot be

prevented from cornering a disproportionate share—or even all—of a public resource because they belong to caste A or B; their share can be limited only by setting aside portions exclusively marked for castes X and Y. But as we have seen, such an exclusive setting aside—or reservations—is already designated as an exception to the norm of non-discrimination and equality. From the perspective of the upper castes, therefore, the constitutional guarantees of equality and non-discrimination amount to a licence to capture *unequal shares* of public resources. This licence is limited only by two things, first the rules of the market or open competition, and second, the exceptional device of reservations. The most significant aspect of this licence is that it can be worked without having to name one's own caste.

Although the commitment to redress caste injustice was integral to the social contract upon which the nation was founded, the new Constitution constrained the victims of caste to demand justice as a caste-marked exception, while its beneficiaries were empowered to demand the perpetuation of their advantages as a casteless norm. Neither route leads towards the annihilation or even the diminishing of caste; but in dominant common sense, one route is presented as having already passed this destination, while the other is accused of leading us away from it. In our time, it is the unbridgeable divergence of these two routes—and their unshakeable internal certainties—that make the 'annihilation of caste' seem more like a disabling dream than an empowering utopia.

THE UNMARKED CITIZEN

Barely six months after the Constitution of the Republic of India was formally adopted, the Madras High Court upheld in July 1950 the plea of two Brahmin petitioners, Champakam Dorairajan and R. Srinivasan, who claimed

that their fundamental right to equality and non-discrimination guaranteed by the Constitution were being violated by caste and community quotas then in force.² [...] The law ministry (then headed by B. R. Ambedkar) and the government (headed by Jawaharlal Nehru) responded swiftly with the first amendment to the Constitution protecting reservations in higher education with the same special proviso already included for job reservations. The first amendment was passed in June 1951, less than two months after the Supreme Court verdict, but the state was put on the defensive.

In reality the courts had been victorious in defeat. They had managed to firmly establish the primacy of the meritocratic norm over the aberrational status of social justice initiatives. At the same time the courts made explicit and endorsed a new kind of agency that the Constitution implicitly offered to the upper castes, an agency based on the universal-normative position of 'castelessness'. This was, however, a presumptive castelessness—that is, it did not require the upper castes to 'give up' their caste in reality; it simply assured them that they would be presumed to be casteless as long as they did not invoke their caste explicitly. In effect, the new Constitution forbade the state to name or act against caste-based privileges or advantages as long as they wore the garb of secular modernity. Constitutionally and legally, caste was henceforth to be recognised only as a source of disadvantage or vulnerability, not as a source of privilege or advantage. And when it was invoked as a liability (as in social justice legislation), it was promptly imprisoned in the straitjacket of a regrettable and hopefully short-lived exception to the meritocratic norm.[...]

Clearly, what is taking shape here is not the 'general category' as such, but rather its immediate ancestor, namely an explicitly caste-marked identity that has

suddenly been freed of its particularistic burden by the 'fortuitous' advent of a historically unprecedented category—the unmarked universal *citizen*. Pictured in this liminal moment at the cusp of tradition and modernity, and posed (so to speak) with its progenitors, the new republic and its freshly minted Constitution, this figure is clearly recognisable as brahmin even as it proudly wears the new clothes of the citizen. These are still clothes; they are not—or not yet—a disguise or costume, and the upper-caste subject is at this early moment in its career remarkably uninhibited about exhibiting signs of caste belonging. But already, even at this inaugural stage, there is an awareness that 'in this land of equality and liberty' the public declaration of upper-caste identity has been made voluntary, and that this could be a decisive tactical advantage. Unlike the compulsory marking of lower-caste identity which the new republic perpetuates and intensifies, upper-caste identity may now be declared or not at will. Most important, the privileges and benefits that accrue to the upper-caste identity may now be accessed anonymously, while its political-moral debts and liabilities are written off by the new Constitution.

The broader consequence of these changes is that the welfare of the upper castes need no longer be pursued in visible fashion through the mediation of public politics. It can now be made congruent with impersonal collective goals like nation-building, development, or later in the story, by equally anonymous forces like the market or globalisation. While it is not perfectly symmetrical, the situation of the lower castes is a study in contrasts—the pursuit of their interests requires the mandatory mediation of public politics, and their needs must usually be articulated as particularistic demands. In brief, upper-caste interests go with the grain of development and the market and appear to involve the exchange of equivalents, whereas lower-caste interests appear as transfer payments that can

only be justified as exceptions. But what is taking shape here is not casteless egalitarianism, but rather an unequal 'democracy' of castes qua castes, as Suditpa Kaviraj has suggested (Kaviraj 2011: 291).

... The main impact of these early [Supreme Court] judgments was ideological, and in this respect it was considerable. By creating the conditions for the infra-visibility-ultra-visibility division, the category of the unmarked citizen helped to mystify the category of caste and its social relations. In fact, it authored and disseminated a new kind of common sense where the very definition of caste was truncated and equated with the *lower castes*. This was in keeping with similar effects produced by other universal-modern categories invested with power—for example, patriarchal common sense reduces gender to women, while white supremacy limits race to non-whites or 'people of colour'. The unmarked universal becomes the abode of normal, naturalised power, its transparent invisibility being a sign of its privilege in contrast to the compulsory markings that subaltern identities were forced to display. It took four decades and the emergence of the key category of the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) before the infra-visibility of the upper castes qua castes—or at least its normal-natural status—could be named and challenged.

AFTER MANDAL

The 1990s were probably the most momentous decade in the life of our republic, and one of its defining events is the social revolution now known simply as 'Mandal'. The Mandal moment marked the long delayed arrival on the national stage of the critical category of the OBCs.... Although it might seem rather obvious in retrospect, the first consequence of OBC assertion for the general category was not immediately recognised. It took some

time for the realisation to sink in that, with the OBCs too being added to the 'reserved category', the general category had now become a euphemism for the upper castes. In fact this had been true since the advent of the Republic, because the general category had been comprehensively colonised by the upper castes and OBC participation in it was negligible. Of course, it was this very fact that had triggered the Mandal upsurge in the first place. Until this moment, the fiction of the 'general' being the all-inclusive universal had been easy to maintain, given that reservations were locked into the exceptional mode from the beginning. The constitutional attempt to be 'caste blind' had worked against the public naming of caste (outside the reserved categories), thus offering an 'equal' anonymity to both the upper castes and the OBCs. But the unequal distribution of material and cultural resources had turned equal anonymity into severely unequal access to privilege and power.[...] Mandal provoked a re-evaluation of the symbolic and practical scope of the general category. [...]

However, the most recent national level assertion of castelessness is that provoked by the proposal to enumerate caste in the Census of 2011. It is here that we see the media and civil society organisations mounting campaigns claiming precisely a casteless identity... Despite efforts to delay, block or otherwise scuttle the proposal, efforts which were ultimately successful, it did seem for a while that caste was actually going to be counted in the 2011 Census. It was this prospect that energised the upper caste elite and crystallised its claims to castelessness. For the first time, the anticaste enumeration campaigns placed more weight on the claim of castelessness rather than on the other consequentialist arguments they had emphasised earlier (Deshpande and John 2010).[...]

One sees the emergence here of a voice and a sensibility that is beginning to believe in its own castelessness. The

fact that such claims invariably emanate from the upper castes—indeed from the elite among them—continues to elude proponents. Once they are successfully interpellated by the ideology of castelessness, upper-caste subjects see their caste identities as incidental or irrelevant to the claim. They can thus assert with some sincerity that it is mere coincidence that everyone who makes such a claim happens to be from the upper castes. This is the generation that is (generally speaking) distanced from the process of the conversion of traditional caste capital into secular modern casteless capital that previous generations effected. It is objectively true that in the life-experience of such individuals—who, it must not be forgotten, may still constitute a minority within their own caste group—caste-qua-caste plays no direct role, or only a minor one. It is for this group—and this group alone—that family seems to have replaced caste as the source of social capital (Béteille 1991). Long accustomed to a comfortably homogeneous environment populated almost entirely by people like themselves, this group is unsettled by the recent arrival of hitherto excluded and therefore strange and unknown social groups in their vicinity. It is the double coincidence of the maturation of a sense of castelessness and the arrival of caste-marked strangers in hitherto upper-caste social milieux that confirms and amplifies this response.

This is a good time, then, to be working towards a biography of the general category. The problem of false universals is already known to us from feminist theory and from critical race theory. We can use the insights of this literature to understand how the general category has fared as a universal in our context. We can also examine the possibility of reclaiming and repositioning this category in the light of what we have learnt. Can we imagine a different avatar of the general category as a ‘true universal’?[...]

ARCHAEOLOGY OF UNTOUCHABILITY*

GOPAL GURU

Let me initiate a dialogue with Sarukkai (2009) by engaging first with what he describes as the metaphysics of the body and later explore what implications this idea has for untouchability in the Indian context. Sarukkai offers us different notions of body that appear in different Indian philosophical traditions. In the Nyaya tradition, the body is the locus of senses and the body feels through the senses. Sarukkai quoting from Lang, further observes that for the Buddha, the body was indeed the world in that it is within the body that there is the arising and ceasing of the world. Quoting from Buddhism, particularly its Madhyamika tradition, he observes that the notion of impurity of body is all pervading. From Buddhism, he elaborates five impurities of the body: womb, seed, body's nature, bodies' characteristics and corpse.

EXTENDED SENSE OF THE IMPURITIES OF THE BODY

Taking the cue from Sarukkai, it is possible to make an extended sense of impurities of the body and argue that, in addition to these five impurities, organic body also contains another set of impurities, which seek to undercut the moral significance of both the sacred (in ritual sense) and perfect (physical sense) bodies. All the organic bodies contain within them negative properties like sweat, excreta, urine, mucus and gases. In the material sense, they are the source of foul smell and unpleasant feeling. Thus, at the metaphysical level, the organic body as the source of

impurities suggests a kind of ontological equality—that everybody is dirty, both in moral sense as well as material sense. Ontological equality suggesting equal distribution of these impurities or organic refuse sitting underneath the skin of everybody is supposed to bring out in every person a moral insight that in turn will compel him/her to acknowledge this ontological equality. To put differently, this insight is supposed to create a sense of self-realisation among people who then can find no reason to produce pernicious classification of bodies into repulsive and attractive (of course, this is bad news for the cosmetic industry). This insight, which can generate a sense of moral relativism, in effect creates the possibility to restrain, and perhaps, totally eliminate morally offensive capacity that a person may use for producing the classification as mentioned above. To put it differently, moral relativism can make it difficult to produce a negative judgement that is often deployed to seek condemnation of the other's body as filthy.

Metaphysics of the body, leading to moral relativism, has significance in as much as it seeks to relativise the notion of the perfect body or 'even out' excess moral value that makes some bodies superior to others. Assigning an egalitarian value to everybody becomes a possibility, what is called ontological mirroring of other bodies. It is in this sense that my understanding of the metaphysics of body makes for a complementary reading with Sarukkai's reading of the metaphysics of body. I suppose both of us suggest a re-description of untouchability that can have implications for the discourse on disability.[...]

MUTUALLY EXCLUSIVE

Touch and contact can acquire mutually exclusive meanings depending on the particular social context. Thus, touch, which is active purely in private and personal

contexts, does not possess any special significance except that it has a functional value. Thus, one hand touching another part of the body has only such a functional value. This touching the touched, as Sarukkai puts it, has a functional value. However, there is another context, in which folding both the hands together acquires a definite social meaning. Thus, the act of touching/folding both the hands can communicate different, perhaps, contradictory messages. For example, in the Indian context, greeting people with both the hands from a distance is considered safe as it serves the purpose of avoiding the touch of others, perhaps, the repulsive other, namely, the Untouchables. This point becomes relevant in the context of Sarukkai's observation that it is only the contact with the other through touch that can define the touched and the untouched. Similarly, Sarukkai's attempt to elevate untouchability much beyond the binary of pure and impure, by invoking the metaphysics of body, as mentioned earlier, plays an important role in collapsing the cultural hierarchy that divided these bodies. Also his invocation of Merleau-Ponty becomes quite instructive to appreciate the role that an Untouchable as an invisible plays in illuminating the touchable.

One can further build on to this insight, and argue that the Untouchable is forced to become the repository of the impurities of the touchable. While this elevation of untouchability beyond the contours of purity-pollution is desirable, at the same time, it also tends to undermine the moral significance of untouchability based on the ideology of purity-pollution. I would like to argue that the Untouchable as supplementation of the touchable has a contradictory value. This is so because it is available for conservative as well as subversive purposes. On a conservative reading, it could be argued that untouchability has a moral significance. Just imagine what would happen to the touchable, if the Untouchable were to

refuse to become the dumping ground for somebody's moral dirt or refuse to illuminate the touchable. It perhaps would lead to the moral decomposition or atrophy of the touchables' body or they would get crushed under the accumulated weight of these impurities. (Thank god, there has been an Untouchable around to carry this burden!) The Untouchables as repository of impurities also have a moral significance for another reason. The upper-caste politicians, including some of the left politicians, should thank the Untouchables for providing a vocabulary to express either their agony or anger against their political opponents or beat the opponents with untouchability as a poisoned weapon. Look at the expression that political leaders use almost every day. 'We are not untouchable', 'Do not treat us as untouchable'. It seeks to undercut the social significance of the twice-born by making the latter realise that they are either parasites or free riders resting their burden on the body of the Untouchables. The moral depletion of these free riders becomes total when the latter refuse to take any responsibility for the Untouchable after he deposits moral dirt in the former.

THE IDEA OF MORAL SIGNIFICANCE

However, the idea of moral significance could be deeply problematic as far as the emancipatory project of the Untouchable is concerned. A person who prefers to stay in untouchability just for the sake of moral significance summarily loses the capacity to question the asymmetrical social relationship between the touchables and the Untouchables. In fact, moral significance becomes a possibility only in the context of this asymmetry. Hence, it lacks transformative potential. The sacrifice made for maintaining the superiority, for example, of the top layer of the twice-born, may have only an instrumental value to the extent that it provides vocabulary to the self-serving

politicians, but it hardly has any transformative value for the slave and Untouchable. Thus, staying in an asymmetrical relationship necessarily subverts the self-understanding that is fundamentally so important for the freedom and ultimate emancipation of the person in question. Those, in question, however, do not stay tied with the master just because they get some spiritual advantage or moral significance. In fact, the force of new aspirations motivates them to walk out from this constraining relationship. They refuse to become the dumping ground for somebody's garbage. This new emancipatory rationality could be very well-captured in the modern mood characterising the subversive politics of Ambedkar and his followers. His mood could be paraphrased in the following sentence, 'It may be in your interest to deposit your impurities in us, but how can it be in our interest to remain repository of your dirt (moral).' In the post-Ambedkar Dalit movement, the critique of Untouchability as supplementation (Sarukkai's expression) is best captured in the term 'Ghamdya'¹ that subverts this Dalit rationality which is the hallmark of Ambedkar's emancipatory politics.

Ambedkar's politics seeks to annihilate caste. But before he attacks its roots, he very systematically seeks to prune its branches—various untouchability practices. For carrying out this attack against casteism through untouchability, Ambedkar does follow an archaeological method. That is to say, through the social struggle he first seeks to question untouchability practices which are the manifestation of the essence of caste. Also for Ambedkar, the solution lies not in morality; on the contrary, it is fundamentally political. It is because of this primacy of the political that he does not lose sight of caste, while he attacks its existence, i.e. untouchability. But for Gandhi, the solution lies not in the political but the moral. Gandhi chooses the moral route which does not centrally take on the essence of

untouchability, i.e. caste. In the Gandhian moral framework of action against untouchability, the contestation, if any, does not encircle the essence of caste but its existence—untouchability. This shift in focus from essence to existence invokes naturally a moral response rather than a political one.

Seva (service) as the moral category in Gandhian discourse on untouchability makes sense in the context of this shift. *Seva* as a moral category, does not seek to attack the roots of the problem, instead it chooses to prune its rough edges. In Gandhi, it is pruning rather than uprooting, while in Ambedkar, the reverse is the case. Although Gandhi looks less interested in establishing the link between untouchability and its essence (caste), it has to be acknowledged that his moral category, *seva*, certainly looks radical when compared to Vedantic thinking, which rules out resolution of untouchability through material and corporeal touch.

THE GANDHIAN APPROACH

Look at Gandhi's body language which is so relaxed and flows freely across time and spaces. Reverse is the case for the Shankaracharya, whose body is folded into itself, it is completely frozen. It is in this sense the significance of corporeality of touch that makes Gandhian approach to untouchability analogous to Ambedkar's. Because both of them insist that an Untouchable must enter the temple with his/her physical body and not through a spiritual mind, which is what the Vedantic view suggests. However, Gandhi and Ambedkar differ from each other quite substantially on other counts. Unlike Gandhi, who finds the solution of untouchability in the moral surgery of the heart, Ambedkar suggests the annihilation of caste of which untouchability is just the existence. According to Ambedkar, the 'brahminical mind' produces opaque forms of untouchability, which

cannot be detected either through sociology or anthropology. Untouchability exists beyond mere description, and hence, requires archaeology that could access untouchability, which as Shinde (1976) has very perceptively pointed out, sits at the bottom of the mind. Ambedkar's thinking and politics follows the archaeological method of discovering the essence of untouchability. Let us explore the question what is archaeology? And why is it relevant for understanding untouchability in 'elegant India'?

ARCHAEOLOGY OF UNTOUCHABILITY

Archaeology, in recent times, has become a generic term that appears in different fields of inquiry ranging from the social sciences to humanities to physical sciences like geomorphology. For example, medical practitioners have been using archaeology to understand the diminishing height (physical) of persons across generations. Parentage with nutritional deficiency, leads to diminishing height in the successive generation. Similarly, in geomorphology, archaeology is an important method to access the natural substance that due to changes in nature gets hidden underneath water bodies, earth and snow.² In fact, changes occurring in the natural substance can best be captured with archaeology as a method of analysis. For example, in the region experiencing snowfall, one finds peaks getting covered with snow and becoming denuded during the hot weather. The importance of archaeology in history deals not so much with invention, but discovering historical evidence in different forms (artefacts, even quantitative data) so as to provide the background for making conjectures and their refutation. The debate among the Indian historians over certain disputed historical structures proves this point quite adequately. Archaeology in history thus involves extracting the truth from the past by

‘carefully’ discovering and analysing the historical data (Nicole 2005). Some of the sociologists also find archaeology as a useful method to study social relations in India.³

Interestingly, archaeology also finds its relevance in the debates between two leading Marxist thinkers: Hobsbawm and Althusser. Hobsbawm finds in Althusser an archaeological operation and identifies in the latter different layers of theoretical thinking, which gradually accumulated on top of Marx’s original thought (Hobsbawm 1994: 1). Finally and most importantly, in the Foucauldian sense, archaeology tries to define not the thoughts, representation, images, themes, pre-occupations that are concealed or revealed in discourse, but those discourses themselves, those discourses as practices obeying certain rules. It does not treat discourses as document, as a sign of something else, as an element that ought to be transparent, but where unfortunate opacity must often be pierced if one is to reach at least the depth of the essential in the place in which it is held in reverse, it is connected with discourses in its own volume as a monument. It is not interpretative discipline, it does not seek another, better hidden discourse, it refuses to be allegorical (Foucault 1994: 136).

A Foucauldian take on archaeology would also help us to distinguish archaeology from architecture. In the Indian context, Dalits used the metaphor of the pyramid to describe the caste system, and more particularly, the *varna* system, while the Marxists put caste and untouchability as located at the superstructure. In the archaeological sense, caste and untouchability are not a kind of order or an open design. In fact, as we shall see in the following pages it plays out quite secretly and subtly. For example, in public discussion, themes on Dalits come to be listed at the fag end of a seminar/conference or at the end of a research journal.⁴ This preferential order looks natural, because

those who have the power to put Dalits in an irreversible order, do not find it necessary to provide any reason for such preferential arrangement.

Thus, archaeology seeks to access this inalterability of the 'Indian mind'. It seeks to reveal or fathom the untouchability-ridden 'Indian mind' that hides within itself a persisting element of caste. The Indian mind essentially operates through the subtle act of transferring value from one sphere to another. Thus, archaeology is a generic concept that appears relevant to different scholars in different contexts. However, covering and discovering or melting and freeing are essential and defining features of archaeology common to all the perspectives on archaeology. Second, archaeology for its definition requires a hidden context with opacity or anonymity. That is to say it does not become relevant in a transparent context. Let us explore what is this context for untouchability.

THE CONTEXT OF ARCHAEOLOGY OF UNTOUCHABILITY

Let me in the beginning argue that archaeology as a method of discovering the essence or the truth of caste becomes intelligible only in certain contexts. For example, archaeology may become redundant in the rural context, where caste hierarchies play out openly by resorting to blatant untouchability practices, and hence, caste does not require untouchability to adopt subtle forms for its own expression. Let me make this point clearer by citing evidence from some villages in Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra.⁵ In these villages, where the upper castes have raised a physical wall of separation between the touchables and the Untouchables, archaeology does not need to discover anything more. To put it differently, archaeology requires a spatially ambiguous context for its success. Similarly, archaeology would become ineffective in

the rural context, where the Untouchables still have to appear in the public with body markers (with a broom and basket of filth on the head, certain dress codes, black ribbon on the wrists) constituting them into walking carrion with a concentrated expression of repulsion. To put it differently, archaeology does not make sense, particularly in the face-to-face or intimate social context. Rather, archaeology becomes intelligible in the social context, where every other person appears as a stranger to every other person in opaque social relations. The urban context makes it difficult for the pure Untouchable to remain in touch with the despicable Untouchable. I am already suggesting, as does Sarukkai, that the despicable Untouchable provides a subjective condition for self-preservation of the 'pure untouchables'. The growing dilution of the interactive sphere leading to growing anonymity makes the domestic space within the urban context as the only sphere for the protection of the 'pure untouchable'. The domestic sphere provides an opportunity for the resolution of anxiety that continues to grip the urban upper castes. Let me further argue how the domestic space offers a stable context for the pure untouchable to overcome his/her anxiety.

DOMESTIC SPHERE

First, the domestic sphere offers the space for conducting purificatory functions. The touchables or the twice-born persons use the domestic sphere for both physical and ritual purification. It is quite revealing to note that some of the parents hose down their children after they return home from school, not because their bodies are mired in mud or dust, but because they might have messed up with the Untouchable children, while in the school.⁶ Second, the domestic sphere also provides an opportunity for the upper castes to feel sovereign over controlling the domestic

space. Practising untouchability at home becomes the major source of the sovereignty. The need to realise this sovereignty cannot be fulfilled in the public sphere, which can offer only an abstract sense of sovereignty as citizen of the Indian Republic. This becomes clear from following moves that the pure self makes in protecting the domestic sphere as a sphere of sovereignty. First, he invites only those about whose background he is absolutely sure. He enjoys discretionary power. Second, the twice-born host uses money power to retain his ritual power. In case the twice-born host commits the mistake by inviting a person with ambiguous social identity, he gets food from the hotel; and finally, if he knows the invitee is from the lower caste but cannot avoid inviting him, he offers him a tender coconut. The shell of the used tender coconut is a safe device for avoiding ritual pollution because the shell can be disposed of.

Interestingly, the axis between the domestic and the public spheres provides space for archaeological articulation. As mentioned above, the domestic sphere is the sphere of sovereignty for the upper caste. He/she, due to the pressure of social vigilance, can enjoy sovereignty only in the fragmented time and space and not in continuous time. In fact, the pressure of social vigilance, forces him/her to don universal masks, while he is in the public domain. Thus, he becomes co-worker, teacher, citizen, consumer, and so on, depending on the spheres. In the journey back home, these sacred souls begin to drop each of these universal identities. He becomes completely denuded in the domestic. This is analogous to the archaeology of the glacier as mentioned above. It is in this sense that the domestic becomes the sphere of deflation of pretension. For the Untouchables, therefore, it is the domestic sphere which is the testing ground for the morally integrated or genuine personality. This has been further confirmed by some of the anthropologists (Khare 1984: 14).

How does one get an insight into this deflation of the 'pure self' who hides behind the universal identities? While there are several Dalit autobiographies that offer an insight into this archaeological insight, let me cite an interesting conversation between the upper-caste landlord and the prospective untouchable tenant:

Landlord: May I know your name?

Tenant: My name is Bhagvan. (This Hindu sounding name anticipates a subsequent question from the landlord.)

Landlord: Which region are you from?

Tenant: I am a Maharashtrian. (This does not give any idea of his social background.)

Landlord: Which language do you speak?

Tenant: Hindustani or English.

Landlord: Are you a vegetarian or a non-vegetarian? (This is true in some regions only.)

Tenant: Vegetarian. (This does not help the landlord to overcome landlord's reservations, and hence, he uses the last question.)

Landlord: Where do you work? (This is the last but sure source of knowing the caste of a tenant because as Harkishan Santoshi has observed in his testimonies, the caste of a person reaches to working place earlier than his/her transfer papers [Guru 1986]).

CONTRADICTIONARY MOVE

The conversation between the landlord and the prospective tenant underlies an archaeological move, which is deeply contradictory in nature. The landlord's archaeology involves a set of questions, which are authoritative, irrational, and hence, offensive. This archaeology, which is aimed at restoring inalienability between the sacred self

and the modern enterprise acquires an offensive character, particularly on the normative ground. The prospective tenant, instead of rejecting the irrational question on rational grounds, chooses to cope with it by adopting a defensive archaeology, which involves universal answers for the particular questions. This withdrawal into guided universalism thus suggests a loss of self-esteem as far as the tenant is concerned. The tenant fails to put a counter question to the landlord, thus exposing the latter's failure to follow market rationality. It is by this primacy of the irrational over the rational or ritual value over the monetary value, that the offensive archaeology adopted by the upper-caste landlord cannot be reduced to mere psychology, because the landlord does not ask these questions for satisfying his psychological curiosity. In fact, in this case, the offensive archaeology establishes an ontological link with the ritually superior self. The offensive archaeology, which operates through coercive questioning, in the process tends to render the landlord completely denuded, of course, on moral ground. The prospective tenant also suffers from a painful skinning off layers of different universal identity, which he puts on himself as defence mechanism. Thus, archaeology suggests a double bind.

This offensive archaeology has implications at three levels. First, at the phenomenological level, the social attitude of the ideal Untouchable (the upper caste) does point out the social relations rather than the knowledge conditions. Second, this archaeology suggests the irresolvable tension between a good citizen and a good person. To put it differently, an upper-caste person may be a citizen good enough to grant at least a temporary recognition to an Untouchable, but he/she may not be a good person. Third, the domestic as the private sphere cordoned off by the ideology of purity-pollution effectively denies the private the benign quality of being the space for

healing and recuperating necessitated by the ravages of the public world.⁷ Fourth, this Janus-faced ideal Untouchable thus violates the Aristotelian principle that suggests an interconnection between the private and the public which is bound by the totality of moral qualities of the good 'man'. Finally, the ideal Untouchable and his/her attitudes towards the real Untouchable confirms Sarukkai's main argument, according to which the self-definition of the upper caste or the ideal Untouchable becomes possible only in relation to the ascriptive identity of the Untouchable. This sacred self cannot exist without the presence of other—the despicable Untouchable. This tense co-existence becomes a possibility only through outsourcing untouchability to the other. However, those who supplement untouchability into others continue to suffer from endless anxiety. That is to say they can neither completely detoxify themselves of an element of untouchability, nor can they brandish it openly. Ironically, the predicament makes the archaeological method inevitable for the detection of untouchability, which sits deep in the anxious self.

Notes and References

Introduction

[1.](#) Because of its status as a watershed event and socio-historical reference point, Mandal has now become a generalised term that no longer requires to be set apart by quotation marks, much like Partition or the Emergency.

[2.](#) The best-known versions of this general line of argument include: André Béteille's vigorous critique of Louis Dumont (Béteille 1986, Dumont and Béteille 1987); the perspective pioneered by Bernard Cohn on modern caste as a product of colonial state interventions (Cohn 1987, Appadurai 1994, Dirks 2001); and Arjun Appadurai's questioning of the use of caste and hierarchy as 'gate-keeping concepts' in the study of India (Appadurai 1988.)

[3.](#) Dhareshwar is referring here to Clifford Geertz's use (in *Local Knowledge*) of caste as an example of an 'experience-near' concept for Hindus and Buddhists (Dhareshwar 1993: 11, citing Geertz 1983: 57-58).

[4.](#) See the chapters by Srinivas (Ch. 2) and Béteille (Ch. 4) in this volume for references to village studies and their role.

[5.](#) The phrase is from a famous critique by Louis Dumont and David Pocock (Dumont and Pocock 1957) to which Srinivas made a belated but spirited response (Srinivas 1987, originally published in 1975).

[6.](#) See Gupta (2005). For critical overviews of the village studies genre, see Jodhka (1998) and Deshpande (2007). See also the volume in the same series *Village Society* (Jodhka 2012).

[7.](#) This is recognised in the latest Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) survey of research which has a review essay on 'Dalit Studies'. See Kumar (2014).

[8.](#) Although Kothari's essay was published in 1994, he is relying here on his more than three-decade-long engagement with the Indian polity; Nigam is very much of the next generation of political theorists.

[9.](#) For a summary of various forms of the transition narrative in Indian social science, see Deshpande (2003). For more recent discussions of the loss of this narrative, see Sanyal (2007) and Chatterji (2008).

[10.](#) André Béteille (Ch. 4) makes the same point, probably because he is one of the earlier generation of scholars who has also seen first-hand the recent changes in the paradigms of caste.

[11.](#) Sociologists were initially the only social scientists to contest this hegemonic expectation and earned some notoriety in the early decades of Independence for their 'backward' pre-occupation with caste.

[12.](#) Here is how a collective introduction to a set of essays on the post-national condition puts it, 'The "postnational" signals, for the set of essays presented in this collection, an intellectual condition, a position of critique and a new horizon of intelligibility beyond that constituted by the nation state in its heyday.[...]

To us the post-national emerges as a distinct ethico-political horizon and a position of critique—from a serious ongoing interrogation of the history of nation-states and the souring of its great dream of (abstract) citizenship' (de Alwis et al. 2009: 35).

[13.](#) The original essay juxtaposes the standpoints of two widows—one brahmin and the other Dalit. The two examples (one of which had to be left out of the excerpt presented in this volume) are from two different works written in English and Marathi. The Baburao Bagul story titled 'Mother' on which the excerpt included in this volume is based was originally published in 1969 and Bagul himself

was part of the Dalit Panther movement that was active in Maharashtra in the 1970s.

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2. The Future of Indian Caste

[1.](#) Leach has wrongly attributed the idea of 'dominant caste' to David Pocock. For a definition of 'dominant caste', see my essay 'The Social System of a Mysore Village' in *Village India*, ed. McKim Marriott (Chicago, 1955): 'A caste may be said to be dominant when it pre-ponderates numerically over the other castes and when it also wields pre-ponderant economic and political power. A large and powerful caste group can more easily be dominant if its position in the local hierarchy is not too low.'

- [2.](#) B. S. Cohn, 'The Census, Social Structure and Objectification in South Asia, Part II', p. 3; paper read at the Second European Conference on Modern South Asia, Chicago, University of Chicago, mimeographed.
- [3.](#) Among some potters in north Gujarat who make earthen toys, daughters are not taught the tricks of the domestic trade, but only sons.
- [4.](#) The percentage of villages with a population of less than 500 has decreased from 68.06 per cent in 1951, to 62.05 per cent in 1961, and finally, to 55.33 per cent in 1971.
- [5.](#) See my 'Social Change in Modern India', Chapter 1.
- [6.](#) 'Social Anthropology; A Natural Science of Society?' Radcliffe-Brown Lecture, 1976'. Proceedings of the British Academy. Vol. LXII, 1976, London, pp. 19-20.

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5. Rise of the Dalits and the Renewed Debate on Caste

[1](#). For the controversy, see my article, 'Caste and Politics: The Great Secular Upsurge' (1990), followed by Srinivas et al. (1990).

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6. Kosambi and the Questions of Caste

[1.](#) Chattopadhyaya's edited anthology of Kosambi's essays (2002) has proved invaluable for the present exercise. All citations, unless otherwise stated, are from this anthology.

[2.](#) See for instance, Srinivas (1987).

[3.](#) For example, Raheja (1988).

[4.](#) See, for instance, Rege (2006).

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8. Untouchability and the Law

[1.](#) Use of this term in print can be traced with fair precision to the year 1909. The Maharaja of Baroda in his remarks to the Depressed Classes Mission of Bombay on 18 October, 1909 uses the term and provides an explanation to his audience (Sayaji Rao 1928: 244–45). The adjectival form, ‘untouchably’, is used by Shridhar V. Ketkar in a footnote to his study of the caste system; the preface to the volume is dated September 1909 (see Ketkar 1909: 86). The text of the volume suggests that the author did not have this term at his disposal when he wrote the text. Cf pp. 99 and 121–22. The Maharaja of Baroda was the patron of Ketkar and supported him during the years at Cornell when he wrote this book (see Ketkar 1909: xxvi.) Weitbrecht Stanton 1920: 173 attributes the term’s prominence to the Maharaja.

[2.](#) Criminal cases, other than capital ones, reach the Supreme Court only by certificate of fitness for appeal from high court or because a substantial question of constitutional interpretation is involved (Articles 132, 134). Only two cases involving anti-disabilities legislation have been decided by the Supreme Court; both were appeals against applications of state temple-entry laws (Sri Venkataramana Devaru vs

State of Mysore, AIR 1958 SC 255; Sastri Yagnapurushadasji vs Muldas Bhundardas Vaishya, AIR 1966 SC 1119).

[3.](#)High Court at Allahabad, 6 February 1957. Reported in Indian Civil Liberties Bulletin 4: 255 (March 1957). The prosecution here was under the United Provinces Removal of Civil Disabilities Act, Section 3(l)c, which prohibited refusal of services 'on grounds that ... (customer) belongs to a Scheduled Caste'.

[4.](#)It seems clear that in other contexts the 'public' character of a well is determined by use, not by legal right. Ramkaranlal vs Emperor, AIR 1916 Nagpur, p. 15 (unconvincingly distinguished in Ramekwal Singh vs State, 1954 Criminal LJ, p. 998). Eminent commentators have no hesitation about stating flatly that 'a public place is a place where the public go, no matter whether they have a right or not'. Ratanlal and Thakore 1948: 634 (commentary on IPC Section 277).

[5.](#)Since Untouchables are protected from caste discrimination specifically in regard to wells supported by or dedicated to the public by Article 15(2), it might be thought that Article 17 would avoid superfluity in this regard only if it covered facilities beyond those covered by Article 15(2). Such a reading would comply with the general principle of giving effect to all provisions of an enactment, so that none of them are nugatory (see Basu 1965, vol. I: 38–39).

[6.](#)Cf the remarks of Pandit Pant, then Home Minister, to Parliament: 'This Bill does not apply to Hindus alone. It applies to all.... It will apply not only to Scheduled Castes, but probably to Christians in the south who are not allowed to enter churches by those who consider themselves as belonging to higher classes. There are certain Muslims who are treated in the same manner by the followers of Islam. They will have the benefit of this provision. It is for their benefit that the word "untouchability" has been left

undefined (Lok Sabha Debates, 27 April 1955, columns 6545, 6672).

[7.](#) Unless, of course, 'untouchability' is to be taken as co-terminous with Hinduism. This would accord with the scope of the temple-entry power conferred by Article 25 (2)b, which is confined to Hindu institutions.

[8.](#) See the definition of 'place of public worship' in UOA, Section 2(iv).

[9.](#) 'Religion' and 'religious denomination' have shifting meanings. Adopting the dictionary definition of denominations as 'a religious sect or body having a common faith and organisation and designated by a distinctive name', the Supreme Court (Commissioner vs Laxmindra Thirtha Swamiar, AIR 1954 SC 282) concluded that every sect and subsect within Hinduism would qualify. Jains and Parsis are also religious denominations. AIR 1954 SC 388. Hinduism as a whole is a 'denomination' and each school within it and every territorial or doctrinal subgroup within such a group is a 'section thereof'. Laxmindra Thirtha Swamiar vs Commissioner HRE, AIR 1952 Madras, pp. 613, 639.

[10.](#) To the extent that these qualifications represent a desire to preserve denominational prerogatives and the rights of Muslims, Christians, Jains, etc. to control access to their premises, they are superfluous, since it is only exclusion on 'grounds of "untouchability"' that is outlawed and 'untouchability' has been interpreted not to include religious exclusiveness. Devarajiah vs Padmanna, AIR 1958 Mysore, p. 84.

[11.](#) Sections 4(ii), 4(iv) and 4(ix). Strangely enough the qualification is omitted from Section 4(x) regarding the 'observance of any ... religious custom, usage or ceremony or taking part in any religious procession'. Thus, Untouchables seem to have legal access to the religious

processions of Hindu denominations and sects, but not to their wells, etc.

[12.](#)Besides the statutes referred to in notes 197 and 198 below, the 'denomination' limitations of Section 3 of the UOA are overcome by the Madras Temple Entry (Authorisation) Act, 1947. This is the only one of the earlier anti-disabilities acts which was not repealed upon passage of the UOA (see Schedule to UOA.) The Madras Act is in force in part of Andhra Pradesh. RCSCST 1959-60, p. 29. No other state has enacted remedial legislation. The Central Law Minister and the Minister of Home Affairs declined to recommend any Central legislation to solve this problem RCSCST 1958-59, p. 3.

[13.](#)Bombay Hindu Places of Public Worship (Entry Authorisation) Act, 1956 (Act 31 of 1956). (The Supreme Court has held that this legislation extends even to sectarian groups, historically connected to Hinduism, which presently claim to be distinct from it. Sastri Yagnapurushadasji vs Muldas Bhadurdas Vaishya, AIR 1966 SC 1119.) Kerala has recently passed similar remedial legislation, the Kerala Hindu Places of Worship (Authorisation of Entry) Act, 1965 (Act 7 of 1965).

[14.](#)United Provinces Temple Entry (Declaration of Right) Act, 1956 (Act 33 of 1956). This Act contains no penal provision, but declares the rights of all sections of Hindus to participate in worship in Hindu temples and prohibits the courts from recognising any custom, usage or practice to the contrary. After passage of the act, criminal prosecution under ordinary law were instituted against those who obstructed Harijans from entering the Viswanath Temple at Benares.

[15.](#)The power conferred by Article 25(2)b is wider than that exercised by the UOA in another respect. The constitutional power extends not only to temples but to all 'Hindu religious institutions'. It includes the full array of institutions of

instruction, meditation, and hermitage as well as the 'places of public worship' and the sacred tanks and waters dealt with by the UOA (see VII CAD 828-29).

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9. Phenomenology of Untouchability

[1.](#) It is difficult to summarise the characteristics that would define an Untouchable in its full generality. The standard accounts that use pollution/purity to define this class run into trouble because of many exceptions, both from within that class and outside it. One classification that is more inclusive is as follows: The Untouchables in Indian society are those who are '(1) economically dependent and exploited, (2) victims of many kinds of discrimination, and (3) ritually polluted in a permanent way' (Deliege 1999: 2). See also, B  teille (1992).

[2.](#) Quigley's later book (2005) has a section on kingship and untouchability but says little of value about the nature of

untouchability and misses the fundamental import of untouchability in brahmins.

[3.](#)See Fuller (1979) and Bean (1981), for descriptions of madi in different communities. These approaches, like most others, are primarily concerned in understanding this practice in terms of purity and pollution. What I am suggesting here is the need to focus on the concept of untouchability as a primary term in this analysis, which then leads to a very different reading of these practices as well as creating possibilities of new political interventions.

[4.](#)There are differences in this practice across communities. Also, there are various subtleties present such as the distinction between cotton and silk cloth in relation to madi.

[5.](#)Similar states are applicable to the women also.

[6.](#)In the brahminical Ramanuja tradition, there are many stories of non-Brahmins (including Dalits) who occupy highly respected positions in this movement. The 12 alwars—the supreme spiritual figures for this community—include non-brahmins. The Divya-Prabandam is the ‘Tamil Veda’ and is the central text for this community. Arguably, the most important part of this text is another text called the Thiruvaimozhi. Verse 379 of this text is roughly translated as follows: ‘Those who do not belong to the known four castes but to the most backward called Chandalas—not having anything to be admired of—if they are devotees of Lord Vishnu then not only they but their disciples too are my God.’ There are other such sentiments in the text. Such references to the other castes, along with folk narratives of important non-brahmin and Dalit persona in this brahminical tradition, suggest once more the difficulty in understanding caste dynamics in terms of rigid distinctions based on some ideas of purity and impurity.

[7.](#)See Pandian’s (2008), analysis of the creation of the brahmin community in Tamil Nadu.

[8.](#)See Wikipedia entry for Rudali.

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12. Caste and Agrarian Class

[1.](#) Thus, Praveen Chaudhry, writing about agrarian unrest in Patna district, pointed to the irrelevance of caste ('the caste structure is breaking up') and underscored the class dimension by stating that the struggle was between 'landless poor peasants and middle peasants on the one hand and landlords on the other' (1988: 56). The same emphasis is found in a significant paper by Prasad, who attributed the agrarian violence in Bihar to the contradiction between the 'rural oligarchy' and 'direct producers' (1987: 847). The former comprises mainly large landowners, and the latter include marginal landholders, petty tenants, and agricultural labourers. His analysis does not explicitly point to the significance of caste in this contradiction.

[2.](#) The dominant castes in question comprise: (i) 'traditional' dominant castes, in particular bhumihar and rajput; and (ii) the upper stratum of the other backward classes (OBC) comprising yadav, kurmi, and koeri, among whom the well-to-do sections are prominent in the agrarian economy and politics (see Prasad 1980, 1991). Several among the latter were tenants of zamindars, and later became de jure landholders following the land reform programme in Bihar. It should be noted, though, that in certain parts of Patna,

Nalanda, and Rohtas districts (in central Bihar), the zamindars were kurmis (see Nathan 1996: 167–68).

³See, for instance, Hindwan (1996: 23–26); S. K. Mishra (1999: 1–2); and C. Mishra (1999: 13–15). The last-mentioned, commenting on the violence, stated categorically: ‘It is dalits vs bhumihar, caste-based killings’ (p. 14). It should be pointed out here that the issue of caste conflict in Bihar had been addressed earlier by Prasad (1979), but his main concern then was the analysis of the ‘social and economic roots’ of the ‘contradiction ... between the upper caste Hindus and the middle castes (those falling under the OBC)’ (ibid.: 481). The same contradiction forms the theme of his essay in 1991, which is concerned with north India generally, with some pointed references to Bihar (1991: 1924–25).

⁴Jha (1997b: 18–19) provides information in chronological order on the formation of dominant caste militias.

⁵For a comprehensive list of the lower stratum of the OBC in Bihar, categorised as ‘depressed backward classes’, see Government of India (1980, Part II: 242).

⁶Hindwan (1996: 23, 25) provides a social profile of the underclass in Bihar on the basis of a field survey.

⁷The Naxalite movement in central Bihar traces its origin to the militant tribal uprising in Naxalbari (in Darjeeling district, West Bengal) that took place in 1967. The movement is deeply fragmented: in 1996, according to Bela Bhatia, nearly 17 Naxalite groups operated in various parts of Bihar. She also states that all, except one, subscribe broadly to the ideology of the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist)—CPI(ML). The prominent exception is the Maoist Communist Centre (MCC), which is identified with Mao’s path of agrarian revolution in China (Bhatia 2000: 53–63). Jha (1997b: 12–17) lists 45 incidents covering the two categories of violence mentioned. Although there are some gaps in the information, it is abundantly clear that members

of the underclass were victims in an overwhelmingly large number of incidents. Only six cases of retaliatory violence by Naxalite groups against bhumihar or rajput landholders have been mentioned. See Harriss (1982: 17), whose expression I have used.

[8.](#)The material in this section is drawn mainly from Chapters 2, 3, 4, 6, and 7 in Chakravarti (2001).

[9.](#)The table excludes two categories of households that are not central to my discussion on class relations in Aghanbigha: (i) nine households that fall outside the structure of class relations, and (ii) six households constituting 'residual classes'. Of the 2013.01 acres of land owned by both the principal and residual classes together (which adds up to the land owned in the community as a whole, as shown in Table 12.1), 1994.36 acres was owned by the former and 18.65 acres by the latter.

[10.](#)It should be noted that not all bhumihars were maliks. Two households have been classified among tenant cultivators, and three households are included among the residual classes (Chakravarti 2001: 114, 126–28).

[11.](#)The upper-caste landholders (i.e., other than bhumihar) comprised brahmin, rajput, and kayasth; those from middle castes comprised yadav, kesarbani vaish, halwai, teli, hajam and markande.

[12.](#)Among the reasons for this fact is that the heads of these two households were affines of members of the dominant lineage in the village, and therefore did not have any birthright in its land.

[13.](#)The relevant provisions of the law fall under Section 48 of the Bihar Tenancy Act, 1885 (Government of Bihar 1975: 43–44).

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13. Employment, Exclusion and 'Merit' in the Indian IT Industry

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14. Where the Path Leads

[1.](#)We also have two students from the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), a distance learning university.

[2.](#)In keeping with our promises of confidentiality, we have altered the names of the respondents to pseudonyms.

[3.](#)Surinder Jodkha and Katherine S. Newman (2007).

[4.](#)Joleen Kirshenmann and Kathryn Neckerman (1991).

[5.](#)Goffman (1961). Goffman uses the term 'discrediting' information when describing the faultlines in an interactive setting that occur when someone makes a gaff and inadvertently reveals that their claims to a particularly identity are false.

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15. Ruptures and Reproduction in Caste/Gender/Labour

1. One such dialogue took place in 2009 between feminists, documented in the report *Jender aur Jaati ke Vishay par Vichaar-Vimarsh*, May 2009, Nari Attyachar Virodhi Manch (Forum Against Oppression of Women—FAOW), Bombay. Copies available with the author, FAOW and Awaaz-e-Niswaan, the latter being the Mumbai-based feminist collectives and participants in the dialogue.
2. From among a host of writings on mainstream Indian women's movements, these essays by Nandita Shah and Nandita Gandhi, R. Kumar and Ilina Sen provide a glimpse into the notions of autonomy that form the aspirational spirit among feminists in autonomous women's groups.
3. A recent unique articulation of Dalit, bahujan and Adivasi feminists, the (First) National Dalit and Adivasi Women's Congress, took place on 15–16 February 2013 at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), organised along with Insight Foundation, Delhi, and the Dalit and Tribal Social Work International Collective. A short report on the same was published on 20 February 2013, and can be accessed at http://surepally.wordpress.com/2013/02/21/caste_gender_oppression.

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17. The Satyashodhak Samaj and Peasant Agitation

[1.](#) Both, however, note that the party also played a broader role; in Béteille's words, it was responsible for creating 'a distinctive idiom for South Indian politics', i.e. one of secularistic anti-brahman Tamil nationalism, which was to have a wider appeal and longer history than the party itself.

[2.](#) The British district of Satara included what is now Satara, as well as some areas now in Sangli district.

[3.](#) These were sold by two manufacturers, Danjishaw Cooper, a Parsi member of the Non-Brahman Party, and Kirloskar, a brahman manufacturer who is one of the richest industrialists of Maharashtra and has also taken care to cultivate relations with the rich peasant elite.

[4.](#) It is difficult to estimate either the extent or effect of the migration. Webb (1929) argued that emigration figures were hopelessly underestimated, noting that 18,3,000 emigrants from Satara were in other parts of the presidency (p. 5). Aside from helping the peasants to survive, there are also adverse effects. Most settlement officials felt that returning workers were buying up land and pushing up its price; but in a village study in Poona district of the same period, H. H. Mann (1924) concluded that the financial remissions from city work were of almost no significance.

[5.](#) Brahman Defence Committee, 'Brahman-Abraham Bodh' (Poona, ml), a collection of newspaper articles; P. P. Gokhale, 'Jagrut Satara' (Congress Mahotsav, 1935) mentions villages in Patau and Satara talukas in addition to Valva; D 83.

[6.](#) Brahmin Defence Committee, nos 10, 11 indicates seven successful boycotts and four additional ones.

[7.](#) Ibid., no. 34.

[8.](#) Ibid., nos 29, 30, 32.

[9.](#) There were a couple of famous instances of the latter. At a festival at Andumber (Tasgaon taluka), brahmans who traditionally were fed first refused non-brahman demands to eat with them; Bhaurao Patil made a famous five-hour speech that kept the crowd on the spot and prevented anyone from eating: a similar instance occurred at a temple of Ramdas near Satara in 1925; and in 1921 a group headed by Keshavrao Vichare broke up a meeting of Congress people attempting to raise a temple to Tilak. Many of these cases, like the tenants rebellion, resulted in lawsuits. Interview, B. N. Nalavade; Ghurpade, 'Karmavir Bhaurao Patil', pp. 81-83; 'Jtitut Sutanr', p. 82.

[10.](#) Brahman Defence Committee, no. 10, IV.

[11.](#) Ibid., nos 9, 14, 30.

[12.](#) Ibid., no. 34.

[13.](#) Interviews, Phalke, Kamala Vichare, V. D. Chate; Madhavrao Bagal, Bhahujan Samajace Shilpikar* ('Architects of the Masses') (Poona. Leklum Wacan Bhandar, 1966), pp. 132-41, gives a short biography. Vichare's education programme is collected in his book Satya Samshodhan (1954) and a pamphlet of his, 'Peasant Brothers, Organise!' (ca 1940) illustrates his emphasis on mass self-reliance and his opposition to all the political parties of the day.

[14.](#) See Hauser (1961) for a description of Swami Sahajanand, leader of the peasant movement and a severe critic of Gandhi who later moved in the direction of communism.

[15.](#) Ibid. p. 86.

[16.](#)According to one source, the rebellion was described by local newspapers as a 'Communist Revolution' (Bandall): Uttamrao Mohite. 'Maharidarbhaca Lokueta: Dr Rartjahrao Deshhutkh' (Amraoti, 1950), p. 7.

[17.](#)There is little written information on Anandaswami and my sources are primarily interviews; Kolhapur; 1 J. Jadhav; Poona: V. D. Chute; Ahmednagar: Madhavrao Mukundrao Patil and Vidyadhai Auti; Nagpur: Bahurao Bhosle, R. Kotanikar. Information is also given in Din Mitra and Satyashodhak Conference notes.

[18.](#)'Satyashodhak Samaj tini Atyacar'. Din Mitra, 20 June 1923. This article discussed incidents in both Satara and Sholapur districts, remarked that 'many Brahmans are writing that with these excesses the Satyashodhaks are Bolsheviks' and argued, 'Why shouldn't tenants who are exploited resort to militant action?'

[19.](#)Uttamrao Patil and Appusaheb Lad, 'Krantivir Nana Patil' (Audh: Usha Prakashan, 1947), 'Krantivir Nana Patil', p. 24.

[20.](#)Legislative Council Debates, 1923. Appendix O.

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21. The Dalit Question and the Political Response

[1.](#) The first coalition government lasted from 4 June to 17 October 1995; the second from 21 March to 20 September 1997 and the third from 4 May 2002 to 29 August 2003.

[2.](#) For details, see Pai 2003.

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22. Khairlanji and Its Aftermath

[1.](#)On the Dussera day, 15 October 2002, five persons hailing from the Dalit community were lynched to death in open daylight by the Viswa Hindu Parishad (VHP)/Bajrang Dal activists at Jhajhar district of Haryana in active connivance with the police. See Anand Teltumbde's, 'Onslaught of Fascist Hindutva on Dalits: Impact and Resistance', available

at http://www.Ambedkar.org/vivek/ailc_speech.pdf, accessed on 23 December 2006.

2. On 14 May 2003, in Bhutegaon, district Jalana of Marathwada region, a youth, Dilip Shendge was burnt alive by the caste Hindu mob of the village. See 'Violence against Dalits in Marathwada: The Caste Cauldron of Maharashtra, a Fact-Finding Report', CPDR, 2003, available at <http://www.pucl.org/Topics/Dalit-tribal/2003/caste-cauldron.pdf>, accessed on 23 December 2006.

3. In Sonna Khota village, district Beed of Marathwada region, a Dalit family was attacked by a caste Hindu mob. The mob chased Bhaurao Dongre when he ran to save himself from the attack and stoned him to death. See 'Violence against Dalits in Marathwada: The Caste Cauldron of Maharashtra, a Fact-Finding Report', CPDR, 2003, available at <http://www.pucl.org/Topics/Dalit-tribal/2003/castecauldron.pdf>, accessed on 23 December 2006.

4. Rashtriya Sambuddha Mahila Sanghatana, a memorandum circulated for organising the protest rally in Bhandara, Vidrohi. Some fact-finding reports say that Bhaiyalal Bhotmange got it from his maternal uncle. 'Organised Killings of Dalits in Khairlanji Village: A Report under SC-ST (PoA) Act, 1989', Babasaheb Ambedkar Research and Training Institute, Department of Social Justice, Government of Maharashtra and Centre for Equity and Social Justice, Yashada, available at <http://www.mailarchive.com/zestcaste@yahoogroups.com/msg05124.html>.

5. Police patil is an honorary post in the village.

6. The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), in its report on 'Prevention of Atrocities against Scheduled Castes', authored by retired civil servant K. P. Saxena had indicted successive governments for their lukewarm response to atrocities against Dalits.

[7.](#)Manuski Advocacy Centre, 'Caste Atrocity in Khairlanji—A Fact-Finding Report', Pune, 2006, available at <http://atrocitynews.wordpress.com/files/2006/10/khairlanji.pdf>, accessed on 24 December 2006.

[8.](#)It appears many people knew of the decision. At least one woman deposed to one fact-finding team that she did.

[9.](#)National Crime Research Bureau, Annual Report 2005, Table 7.1, p. 299, available at <http://ncrb.nic.in/crime2005/cii-2005/CHAP1.pdf>, accessed on 23 December 2006.

[10.](#)'Hame Padhe Likhe Logone Dhoka Diya', Mahanayak, Mumbai, 11 October 2006.

23. Comparative Contexts of Discrimination

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24. Who Are the Other Backward Classes ?

[1.](#)The Fort St. George Gazette No. 40 of 5 November 1895 mentions grants-in-aid to schools for a list of 'Backward Classes' which includes most of the 'Untouchable' castes of Madras Presidency. Irschick (1977) notes that the term was used as far back as 1880 to describe a list of groups, also called illiterate or indigent classes, entitled to allowances for study in elementary schools.

[2.](#)Prime Minister Nehru observed,
... we have to deal with the situation where for a variety of causes for which the present generation is not to blame, the past has the responsibility, there are groups, classes, individuals, communities, if you like, who are backward. They are backward in many ways—economically, socially, educationally—sometimes they are not backward in one of these respects and yet backward in another. The fact is therefore that if we wish to encourage them in regard to

these matters, we have to do something special for them. Id, 9616.

In spite of his reluctance to talk about caste, it is clear that what was intended were not measures to erase all inequalities, but specifically those which were associated with traditional social structure we want to put an end to ... all those infinite divisions that have grown up in our social life ... we may call them by any name you like, the caste system or religious divisions, etc. There are of course economic divisions but we realise them and we try to deal with them.... But in the structure that has grown up ... with its vast number of fissures or divisions.... The prime minister's extraordinary reticence about using the word 'caste' was not shared by all of his fellow members. Cf the more straightforward remarks of Reverend d'Souza, Id, at 9689-90; Deshmukh Id, at 9775-76.

[3.](#) Thus, K. T. Shah, the strongest advocate of an individualised approach, avowed that the backwardness to be remedied was economic (Id, 8121) and proposed to eliminate the word 'classes' and to add 'economically' to the qualifiers of the term 'backward classes' (Id, 9815). Prime Minister Nehru, explaining his unwillingness to accept any of the amendments, indicated that he had no objection to adding 'economically', but that to do so would put the language at variance with that of Article 240. He then observed:

But if I added 'economically' I would at the same time not make it kind of a cumulative thing but would say that a person who is lacking in any of these things should be helped. 'Socially' is a much wider word including many things and certainly including economically (Id, 9830).

[4.](#) Nehru is reported as saying at the inauguration of the Backward Classes Commission (on 18 March 1953) that he disliked the term Backward Classes, and that it was basically wrong to label any section as backward even if they were

so, particularly when 90 per cent of Indians were poor and backward. I BCC 3. This seems to mark a shift from his 1951 position in the debate over Article 15(4) (see note 59 supra).

[5.](#)I BCC 11. Apparently the absence of caste data was the deliberate policy of Sardar Patel, the Home Minister until 1950, who rejected caste tabulation as a device to confirm the British theory that India was a caste-ridden country and an expedient 'to meet the needs of administrative measures dependent upon caste division'. From a 1950 address to the Census Conference, quoted as I BCC 9. Cf III BCC 18.

[6.](#)In addition to the Chairman's repudiation, three other members of the Commission, including the secretary, filed minutes of dissent objecting to the caste basis of classification (Minutes of Dissent of Anup Singh, Arunangshu De, P. G. Shah.). Two other members dissented on the ground that the Commission had not gone far enough: T. Mariappa merely objected to the failure to include urban Lingayats and Vokkaligas in Mysore; S. D. Singh Chaurasia set forth a detailed proposal for equating Backward Classes with Sudras. The various Minutes of Dissent make up Volume III of the Commission's Report.

[7.](#)See e.g. Srinivas' 1957 presidential address to the anthropology section of the Indian Science Congress. After a dispassionate review of developments, he suggests, '... it is time to give serious thought to evolving "neutral" indices of backwardness.... The criteria of literacy, landownership and income in cash or grain should be able to subsume all cases of backwardness'. But other less disinterested critics perceived the development of a 'vested interest in backwardness' and all sorts of dire effects on national integration and efficiency. See e.g. Mehta 1963. (There were few to argue the other side. For a rare example, see Subbiah 1963.) For a convenient review with many references to the scholarly and polemical literature of this period, see Barnabas and Mehta (1965).

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27. Census in Colonial India and the Birth of Caste

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30. Enforcing Cultural Codes Gender and Violence in Northern India

[1.](#)In 1946, The Hindu Marriages Disabilities Removal Act was passed, which permitted sagotra (same gotra) marriages between two Hindus notwithstanding any text, rule or interpretation of the Hindu law or any customary usage. This was followed by The Hindu Marriage Validity Act, 1949, which validated the inter-caste marriages. In 1955, was passed The Hindu Marriage Act (no. XXX V of 1955), a far more comprehensive act, which incorporated both these acts and offered more freedom in marriage, separation and divorce. For details of these three acts, see Desai (1966: 468–69, 616–751).

[2.](#)Generally speaking, sexual intercourse in north India among different caste clusters is said to be prohibited with the mother, father's mother, father's sister or her daughter, sister, sister's daughter, brother's daughter, mother's brother's daughter, wife's brother's daughter, daughter and daughter-in-law. Outside these relationships tolerance of sexual laxity is acknowledged. Breaches in relation to

daughter-in-law, however, are known to have existed in the colonial period. See Chowdhry (2004: 84-86, 118).

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32. Dalit Women Talk Differently

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34. Dalit Women as Political Agents

[1.](#)These interviews were done by Praveena K. P. and myself as part of a research project titled 'Gender Governance or Governing Women?', Centre for Development Studies, Thiruvananthapuram. The study focused on various levels of Dalit women's participation in Dalit movements. Forty women from various organisations and struggles were interviewed.

[2.](#)This is the government order that directed that the 'caste of the children out of inter-caste marriage will be decided on the caste of the father'. Order no: Go(MS)11/2005/SC,ST).

[3.](#)This period is marked in the history by the multilevel initiatives of Dalit intellectuals and activists. It varies from

the starting of a publishing house which focused on Dalit subaltern thinking named subject and language press, the formation of a media house under the leadership of the Dalit Utharakalam, a web portal with a clear political affinity towards Dalit debates. Major struggles on land rights, cinema produced and directed by Dalits on Dalit subjects (to mention Gouthami by Ajayan and 3D stereo caste by A. S. Ajithkumar), the early conduct of Dalit painting camps, individual and group painting shows by Dalits, publications of Dalit literature by mainstream publishers and so on would be further examples.

[4.](#) We could find similar type of argument in the essay by Kimberle Crenshaw titled 'Demarginalising the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Anti-discrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics', in which she observes 'the most linguistic manifestation of this analytical dilemma is represented in the conventional usage of the term blacks and women. Although it may be true that some people mean to include black women in either "Black" or "women", the context in which the term is used actually suggests that often black women are not considered' (Crenshaw 2006).

[5.](#) In her essay, 'Mammies, Matriarchs and Other Controlling Images' Patricia Hill Collins gives many stereotypical personas of African-American woman. 'Portraying African American women as mammies, matriarch, welfare recipient and hot mommas has been essential to the political economy of domination fostering black women's oppression' she observes. She also discussed the ways in which the black women fall into the category of 'other' in terms of western standards of beauty.

[6.](#) An unpublished interview with Saleena Prakkanam in 2007.

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37. Secularism, Modernity, Nation

1. I do not intend to underplay the contradictions and conflicts between the Dalits and the Shudras, but clearly, I do not also intend to pit one against the other—especially when, I believe there are certain important common elements of their critique, relevant for my purposes—despite the more real contradictions in the real world. The entire discourse of Kanshi Ram and his Bahujan Samaj Party, in fact, centres around the construction of this larger Bahujan identity. There are quite a few non-Dalit scholars, mostly from the more backward castes, who have affiliated themselves, in the Saidian sense, with the Dalit position and are accepted by large sections of the movement as theirs. I will, therefore, treat them as giving voice to this discourse.

- [2.](#)This expression is suggestively used by Geetha and Rajadurai (1998).
- [3.](#)I owe this point to a discussion with Nivedita Menon. Further discussion with M. S. S. Pandian helped me sharpen the understanding in the context of non-brahminism.
- [4.](#)owe the point about the emergence of the ‘brahmin’ as a political category to M. S. S. Pandian, made in a personal communication to me.
- [5.](#)Some commentators in a recent volume *Dalit Jan-Ubar* (ed. Kanwal Bharati et al.; nd probably 1999), B. M. Prakashan, Lucknow point that enthusiasts of class struggle considered caste an ‘unnecessary complication’, better ignored and wanted to rather look ahead (Renu Rathor, Ashish Rathore and Aviram, *Dakkin Toley Ka Saval*, p. 284).

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38. One Step Outsi de Modernity

[1.](#) Though the essay talks about caste in general, it draws its instances from the brahmins and Dalits. It is so because, given their location in the caste hierarchy, their instances can be of help in delineating sharply the argument of the essay.

[2.](#) Partha Chatterjee is not unaware of this problem. However, even while acknowledging this problem, the primary focus of the book is on the opposition between nationalism and colonialism. It is my plea that if we shift the emphasis from the contradiction between nationalism and colonialism to

the contradictions within nationalism, the outcomes would be rather different.

3. It is rather instructive here to take note of what Stuart Hall and David Held have to say about citizenship: 'The issue around membership—who does and who does not belong—is where the politics of citizenship begins. It is impossible to chart the history of the concept very far without coming sharply up against successive attempts to restrict citizenship to certain groups and to exclude others. In different historical periods, different groups have led, and profited from, this 'politics of closure': property-owners, men, white people, the educated, those in particular occupations or with particular skills, adults.' See Hall and Held (1989: 175).

4. For a recent attempt to characterise Ambedkar as a British collaborator, see Shourie (1997). Characteristically, one of the chapters in the book is titled 'The British Strategem and Its Indian Advocate'.

5. Here is yet another instance of bringing forth western authority to defend caste pollution: Arya Bala Bodini, a children's magazine brought out by the Theosophical Society, wrote in 1897, 'The Brahmins, particularly the Vaisnavites, insist that they be not seen by others while at dinner. The custom is denounced and declared silly. Efforts are made now and then to bring a miscellaneous crowd to eat together and any success that might attend such gatherings is advertised as grand. People, who ought to know better, exult in such small triumphs, as they would put it, over blind orthodoxy. Let us, however, see what a distinguished westerner has to say on this subject. Says Professor Max Muller in the Cosmopolis thus: 'The Hindus seem to me to show their good taste by retiring while they feed, and re-appear only after they have washed their hands and face. Why should we be so anxious to perform this no doubt necessary function before the eyes of our friends?

Could not at least the grosser part of feeding be performed in private, and the social gathering begin at the dessert, or, with men, at the wine....' (Arya Bala Bodini 3 (5): 114, May 1897).

[6.](#)For a recent and highly sophisticated account of the simultaneous inseparability and antagonism between state and community, see Krishna (1999). Let me also note here that the relationship between the narrative of capital and that of community need not always be one of opposition. They can come together in denying a universal western narrative of capital. For example, see Ong (1999).

[7.](#)Emphasising these two roles of a sociologist, M. N. Srinivas wrote, 'The government of India has an understandable tendency to stress the need for sociological research that is directly related to planning and development. And it is the duty of the sociologists as citizens that they should take part in such research. But there is a grave risk that "pure" or "fundamental" might be sacrificed altogether' (Srinivas et al. 1963 [1955]: 5).

[8.](#)Walter Mignola characterises the 'denial of coevalness' as 'the replacement of the 'other' in space by the 'other' in time...and the articulation of cultural differences in chronological hierarchies' in Mignolo (1995: xi).

[9.](#)This is very similar to the manner in which race figures in the western discourse. As Paul Gilroy notes, '... the history of slavery is somehow assigned to blacks. It becomes our special property rather than a part of the ethical and intellectual heritage of the west as a whole' Gilroy (1996 [1993]: 49).

[10.](#)Kothari (1986 [1970]: 4). For a similar argument, see D. L. Sheth, 'Changing Terms of Elite Discourse: The Case of Reservation for Other Backward Classes' in Sathyamurthy, ed. (1996).

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39. Caste and Casteless ness

- [1.](#)First published in 1945 and 1943 respectively, both works are included in Ambedkar (1990).
- [2.](#)For more detailed treatments of this famous case, see, inter alia, Galanter (1984: 164ff) and Kannabiran (2012: 166–73).

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40. Archaeology of Untouchability

[1.](#)For more discussion, Guru (1996). This term could also be understood through the literary imagination of Dalit literary writers like Prahlad Chendwankar, who has written the poem 'The Cup'.

[2.](#)I benefited from the discussion I held with Harjit Singh, an expert in glaciology

[3.](#)C. Kramer, I. E. Douglas quoted in Nicole (2005: 242).

[4.](#)Bibilio 8 (9 and 10), October 2002

[5.](#)Frontline, December 2008.

[6.](#)

[7.](#)Michel de Certeau quoted in Gupta (2003: 56).

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Authors

K. Balagopal was an activist and human rights lawyer based in Hyderabad. He wrote extensively for the Economic and Political Weekly (EPW) for more than two decades.

André Béteille is National Research Professor and Professor Emeritus of Sociology, University of Delhi.

Anand Chakravarti retired as Professor of Sociology at University of Delhi. He currently holds the S. K. Dey Chair in Local Government at the Institute of Social Sciences, New Delhi.

Uma Chakravarti is a historian. She taught at Miranda House, University of Delhi.

Prem Chowdhry is an independent scholar and former fellow, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi.

I. P. Desai was Professor of Sociology at MS University, Baroda, and the founding director of the Centre for Social Studies, Surat.

Ashwini Deshpande is Professor at Department of Economics, Delhi School of Economics, University of Delhi.

Satish Deshpande is Professor at Department of Sociology, Delhi School of Economics, University of Delhi.

Marc Galanter is the John and Rylla Bosshard Professor of Law and South Asian Studies at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, and LSE Centennial Professor at the London School of Economics and Political Science.

Meena Gopal is Associate Professor at Advanced Centre for Women's Studies, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai.

Dipankar Gupta was Professor of Sociology at Jawaharlal Nehru University and is now the Director of the Centre of Political Affairs and Critical theory at Shiv Nadar University, Noida.

Gopal Guru is Professor at the Centre for Political Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

Kancha Ilaiah is with the Centre for Study of Social Exclusion and Inclusive Policy, Maulana Azad National Urdu University, Hyderabad.

J. Jeyaranjan is with Institute of Development Alternatives, Chennai.

Surinder S. Jodhka is Professor of sociology, Centre for the Study of Social Systems, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

Mary E. John is Senior Fellow, Centre for Women's Development Studies (CWDS), New Delhi.

Irawati Karve was for many years the Head, Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Deccan College, Pune University.

Rajan Krishnan is with School of Culture and Creative Expressions, Ambedkar University, Delhi.

Rajni Kothari is best known as the founding director of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), Delhi.

Baldev Raj Nayar is Professor Emeritus of Political Science, McGill University, Montreal, Canada.

Katherine S. Newman is James B. Knapp Dean, Zanvyl Krieger School of Arts and Sciences, The Johns Hopkins University, Maryland, USA.

Aditya Nigam is Professor at Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), Delhi.

Gail Omvedt is an American-born Indian scholar, sociologist and human rights activist.

Sudha Pai is Professor at Centre for Political Studies, School of Social Sciences, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

M. S. S. Pandian is Professor of History, Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

Rekha Pappu is Associate Professor at the Centre for Education, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Hyderabad.

M. Madhava Prasad is Professor at the Centre for European Studies, The English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad.

Rekha Raj is a writer, activist and researcher affiliated to the Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam.

Mohan Ram was a journalist from Tamil Nadu who wrote on a range of issues including Naxalism, the anti-caste movement, and language agitations for several English dailies and weeklies as well as the Economic and Political Weekly and Mainstream.

Sharmila Rege was a professor at the Savitribai Phule Women's Studies Centre, Department of Sociology, University of Pune.

Kumkum Roy is Professor at Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

Anandhi S. is Associate Professor, Madras Institute of Development Studies, Chennai.

Padmanabh Samarendra teaches at the Dr K. R. Narayanan Centre for Dalit and Minority Studies, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi.

Sundar Sarukkai teaches at the Manipal Centre for Philosophy and Humanities, Manipal University, Manipal.

K. Satyanarayana is Associate Professor in the Department of Cultural Studies at the English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad.

Ghanshyam Shah has been at the Centre for Social Studies, Surat, and retired as Professor at the Centre for the Study of Social Medicine, JNU.

D. L. Sheth retired as Senior Fellow at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, Delhi.

M. N. Srinivas was perhaps India's best-known sociologist. He established departments of Sociology at the Universities of Baroda and Delhi, and was also associated with the Institute for Social and Economic Change and the National Institute of Advanced Studies in Bengaluru.

Anand Teltumbde is Professor, Vinod Gupta School of Management, Indian Institute of Technology, Kharagpur.

Susie Tharu was formerly professor, English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad, and founder-member, Anveshi Research Centre for Women's Studies.

Sukhadeo Thorat teaches economics at the Centre for Regional Development, Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi, and is chairman, Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR), New Delhi.

Carol Upadhyia is Professor, School of Social Sciences, National Institute of Advanced Studies, Indian Institute of Science Campus, Bengaluru.

Geetha V. is a writer and publisher, and her interests include feminism, caste and education.